

Thomas Dwight Witherspoon (1836–1898)

BIOGRAPHY (1884)¹

In the year 1836 there resided in the village of Greensboro, Ala., a godly family, whose lineage was illustrious in the best sense of the word. Robert Franklin Witherspoon and Sarah Agnes, his wife, could look back to their ancestry with honest pride. Mr. Witherspoon was a ruling elder of the Presbyterian Church, and his *ancestors for five generations* had held the same honorable office. In the great day of the founding of the nation John Witherspoon had set his name to the *Declaration of Independence*, and still further back the godly elder loved to point to one illustrious name from whom he could trace his descent—the intrepid Elijah of Scotland, whose name the whole Christian world will treasure while the world stands—John Knox. If pride in illustrious descent is ever justifiable, it was so in this case.

Mr. Witherspoon was a planter in the neighboring “canebreaks” of Marengo County. He was a man of ardent piety, deeply read in the theological lore, and very fond of theological inquiry. It was in that godly home that the future Moderator was born, on January 17th, 1836. Dr. Witherspoon is now, therefore, in the forty-ninth year of his age. The good elder was an ardent admirer of Timothy Dwight, and Dwight’s “Theology” was his favorite text-book. In honor of his favorite author he gave his boy the name of Thomas *Dwight*.

Four years afterward the godly father fell asleep in Jesus. The boy’s training devolved on his mother, happily a devoted Christian woman, of rare intelligence, sagacity and consecration. Her impress, more than that of any other human being has been upon his whole after life. It pleased God to spare her life until a few years ago, so that she was permitted to reap the fruit of her early and assiduous care in his mental and religious training.

Under the fostering care of such a mother, his religious experiences were very early developed, and in 1846, *at the age of ten years*, the boy made confession of

Christ during the progress of a meeting conducted by the Rev. Robert Nall, D.D., the evangelist of the Synod of Alabama, and was admitted to the communion of the Mt. Zion Presbyterian Church, near Greensboro.

In 1853, at the age of seventeen, he entered The University of Alabama as a student in the Sophomore Class; but in the year following changed to the University of Mississippi, from which institution he was graduated in June, 1856, with the highest honors of his class. In the fall of the same year (1856) he entered the Theological Seminary at Columbia, S.C., completing the course and receiving his theological diploma in May, 1859.²

On the 6th of June, 1859, he was licensed as a probationer for the Gospel ministry by the Presbytery of Chickasaw, of the Synod of Memphis, and on the 13th day of May, 1860, he was ordained by the same Presbytery to the full work of the ministry and installed as pastor of the Presbyterian Church at Oxford, Miss., the site of the university from which he had recently graduated. It was in this, his first church, that a characteristic of Dr. Witherspoon’s ministry was first noticed,

THE SOURCES from which these extracts are taken were provided by Wayne Sparkman.

1. “The Rev. Thomas D. Witherspoon, D.D., LL.D., of Louisville, Ky. Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (Southern),” *The Christian Herald and Signs of Our Times*, Thursday, November 20, 1884 (No. 47 – New Series): 738–739.

2. “He was licensed to preach at Zion Church. He was a graduate of Columbia Seminary and was engaged to be married to Miss Nannie Thornwell, the daughter of Rev. J. H. Thornwell. The very day that they were to be married, death came to the Thornwell home and the bride elect, her wedding robes converted into burial robes, was laid away in the cemetery at Columbia. A beautiful name on her tombstone is read by every student that passes that way, Nannie Witherspoon Thornwell.” The Reverend C. W. Grafton (Cornelius Washington Grafton), “The History of the Mississippi Synod Presbyterian Church, U. S.” (Unpublished manuscript, Union Mississippi, 1927), 527. The University of Mississippi holds the original manuscript and this and the next note have been transcribed from a copy.

which has been observed ever since, wherever he has preached. His teaching has always been especially attractive to young men. There was a warm sympathy in his manner, and a simple, direct, manly force in his words which went straight to the hearts of the young, and he succeeded, by rare tact, in winning their attention to the things which make for their peace. God abundantly blessed him, notably in this sphere of labor, which is, more than any other, a source of strength to the Church.

But this useful work was rudely interrupted.

The outbreak of the war occurred early in Dr. Witherspoon's settlement at Oxford. It was not likely that a congregation such as that he had gathered around him would be indifferent to the issues which were agitating the country from end to end. The young men who looked up to their pastor for spiritual guidance were deeply moved by the events of that sad time. They were true to their principles, and thoroughly in earnest in their convictions of the justice of their cause. When, leaving their homes and their families to take up arms in that bitter struggle, they marched to the field of battle, Dr. Witherspoon marched with them, claiming no exemption as a privilege of his profession, but ready to fight and die with his friends as their comrade. He enlisted as a private in the Lamar Rifles of the Eleventh Mississippi Volunteers, and served in that capacity through the first year of the war. Later, his services were needed so sorely in the capacity in which they were most effective, but they were never remitted. He acted as Chaplain to the regiment, and remained steadfast in that service until, at Appomattox Court House, he received his parole in the final surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia.³

Dr. Witherspoon's courage had been tested on the battle-fields of that long and heart-breaking struggle, and it was to be still further tested by another ordeal, in which even the bravest soldiers have often succumbed. He accepted a call to the Second Presbyterian Church of Memphis, Tenn., where he settled in August, 1865. The war and the miserable time which followed it had reduced the church to a very dispirited and enfeebled condition. Under a ministry of five years, through *epidemics*

of cholera and yellow fever, the church grew with such rapidity that it became and continues to be the strongest and most influential of that denomination in the city.

His health giving way under the influence of excessive labor in a malarial climate, he was forced to resign his pastorate amid the tears of his people, in August, 1870, and to seek recuperation in the mountains of Virginia, spending one year very pleasantly as supply of the mountain church of Christiansburg, Va. In 1871 he was called for a two year's term to the chaplaincy of the University of Virginia, where two of the happiest and most useful years of his life were spent.

During the summer of 1873 a further relief from labor became indispensable. He therefore crossed the Atlantic, and travelled extensively in Europe. After a few months of change he found his health so far restored as to be able on his return to resume regular work; and so, in October 1873, he became pastor of the Tabb Street Presbyterian Church, in Petersburg, Va., one of the largest and most influential churches in the State. Here he remained greatly endeared to the people until the fall of 1882, when, having received a unanimous call to the First Presbyterian Church of Louisville, Ky., he felt it his duty to sever the delightful relations that had existed for nine years, and enter the larger and more vigorous city of the West.

Here he is now serving this important church, and with the superabundant energy which characterizes him and the strong appetite for labor that seems to be a part of his being, he accepted the office of Chairman of the Synod's Committee of Evangelistic Labor, having oversight of that extensive work, in which more than twenty evangelists are employed, and as a result of which over *fifteen hundred communicants* were added last year to the roll of the Synod.

Few men of Dr. Witherspoon's age have shared more of the honors of the church.

There are few of the prominent pulpits of the Southern Church to which he has not at one time or another, when vacant, been asked to devote his pastoral services. He has been time and again solicited to take the presidency of colleges and universities. Various chairs in theological seminaries have been tendered him. But he has felt that his *one mission in life* was to preach the Gospel and nothing has ever turned him aside from this work.

His Preaching, as we have said, is simple, earnest and direct. It is in the only true sense of the word extemporaneous. Though he prepares, with most careful mental elaborations, he never writes before speaking, and therefore, of course, never has any notes with him

3. "After the licensure of Mr. Witherspoon the call came for the loyal ones to enter the war in the great civil conflict and Rev. T. D. Witherspoon entered as chaplain in Davis' Brigade, C.S.A. He stayed right with the boys all the time, carrying his rifle on the field of battle, comforting them and cheering them, taking the hard fare of the boys. He preached to them and buried the dead. After the hard struggle was over he became the noted Dr. Witherspoon of Louisville, Ky. and filled a great field of usefulness. He was Moderator of the General Assembly which met at Vicksburg in 1884 and was the author of a very noted book called "Children of the Covenant." Grafton, 527.

in the pulpit. His sermons, lectures, literary addresses, etc., are all prepared without putting pen to paper, the thoughts being all carefully elaborated, but the language left to the inspiration of the moment.

The degree of D.D. was conferred upon him in 1867, at the age of thirty-one, by the University of Mississippi, and the degree of LL.D., by the same institution, at the age of forty-eight—only a few months ago.

Dr. Witherspoon is of delicate stature, but capable of undergoing an incredible amount of work, and his ministry thus far has been signally blessed in the addition of souls to the church.

Among the publications from his pen may be noted the following: “The Appeal of the South to its Educated Men” (1866); “Children of the Covenant” (1873); “Materialism in its Relations to Modern Civilization” (1878) and “Letters on Romanism” (1882). The second of these has passed through several editions, and has elicited the highest praise as a book of encouragement for parents and instruction for the young.

As an illustration of the position Dr. Witherspoon holds in the esteem of his Northern brethren, we may say that in the course of an interview with Dr. Talmage recently, he said, referring to the subject of our sketch: “I am glad that you are going to give a biographical sketch and portrait of Dr. Witherspoon in your paper. He is one of the grandest and best men in the South. He wields a large influence, and it is always on the right side. I rejoiced with many when I saw that the Presbyterian Church honored itself by selecting him as Moderator of General Assembly.”

T. D. WITHERSPOON AS A PREACHER (1900)⁴

The observant study of the personality and the methods of work followed by effective preachers affords an exceedingly useful form of homiletical research. The careful study of the best treatises on homiletics is a good thing, but to observe the preacher actually at work is often better. In any event, such study of homiletics in the concrete is a valuable addition to its investigation in the abstract.

In this article the personality and pulpit work of the late Dr. Witherspoon, Professor of Homiletics and Pastoral Theology in Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, who passed away deeply lamented a little more than a year ago, will be studied for the purpose, namely, of bringing out some useful hints that may be of value to younger ministers. We have heard many preachers in this and other lands, and we can freely say that, as a sermonizer, the subject of this article had very few equals; and as a preacher, if he had possessed

a deep, rich voice, he would have had few superiors in this generation as an effective popular pulpit orator.

It was the writer’s privilege to know him very intimately; and, by the courtesy of his family, he has had the advantage of access to his literary remains for this study. Such a study naturally falls into two parts. The first deals with the personality of the man, and the second with his methods as a preacher.

The Personality of the Man.

He was a thorough gentleman. He came from noble ancestry, having in his veins the blood of John Knox. He was dignified and courteous, and always showed this in his intercourse with all classes of people. The most cultured greatly respected him, and those in the lowly walks of life always felt at ease in his presence. In him dignity and courtesy, gentleness and strength, self-respect and consideration for others were finely blended.

Such a man had in this respect important gifts for the preacher. The pulpit always needs such men. When the call to the ministry comes to the sons of our best families, the result is one of God’s noblest gifts to His Church. The Church needs men from all the walks of life, and she urgently requires that all alike be gentle and strong, refined and dignified. A boorish manner or a clownish way in the pulpit will greatly limit a preacher’s usefulness. Good manners, fine feelings, and refined instincts on the part of the preacher will touch a responsive chord in all classes.

His mental gifts were superior. This appeared during his career as a student, and was evident all his life. His powers of mind were finely balanced and harmoniously developed. His logical power was good, his philosophical insight was keen, and he could think a matter through in a very thorough way. His imagination was unusually fine. It was vivid, yet always under the control of good taste and judgment. It was this faculty, with the fine poetic feeling which went along with it, that enabled him to produce profound impressions.

4. “The Late Rev. Thomas D Wight Witherspoon, D.D., LL.D., as a Preacher,” By Francis R. Beattie, Ph.D., D.D., LL.D., Louisville, Ky., Professor In Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Author Of “Radical Criticism,” Etc., *The Homiletic Review*, Volume 39 (Funk & Wagnalls, 1900): 214–219. In a note to the title of his piece Beattie writes, “The readers of *The Review* are familiar, through his valuable articles on preaching, with the name of Dr. Witherspoon, who entered into rest November 3, 1898. While he was very popular as a preacher with people of the highest culture, he was equally popular with the rough mountaineers of Kentucky. His work of instruction in the Louisville Theological Seminary of the Southern Presbyterian Church was supplemented by summer evangelistic campaigns in the mountains. His varied experience makes the study of his personality and his methods of peculiar value to other preachers.”

For the preacher all this is important. These gifts, used as they were by Dr. Witherspoon, enabled him to reach all classes. He could edify the refined city congregation, and could deeply move a gathering of peasants among the hills. The Church needs the very best minds for her service, for the day is past when these gifts, consecrated to the Master's service, can any longer be despised. Above all, to the careful cultivation of the imagination every minister should give earnest attention. This faculty gives vividness and concreteness to preaching. Its use enables the preacher to reproduce Scriptural scenes, and to illustrate the truths he presents in such a way that they stand before the audience like very pictures. The truth has color and movement given to it, and it is thus made attractive and effective. If young ministers would save themselves from getting prosy, they must cultivate the imagination.

He had a deeply sympathetic nature. He had a warm heart as well as a good head. His feelings were very kindly, so that he had sincere sympathy with people in all conditions. The result was that rich and poor, high and low felt that they had ready access to him. He could with the same natural graciousness enter the mansion of the cultured and the cabin of the mountaineer. Children were drawn to him, and those in trouble and sorrow readily sought him in seasons of distress. This gave his preaching a warmth and pathos that ministered much comfort to those in trouble.

He was also in ardent sympathy with nature in her varying moods. Some of his most striking illustrations were drawn from this source. When moderator of the General Assembly in 1884, and at the Westminster Assembly Celebration in 1897, illustrations of this kind then used in public addresses produced effects almost electrical. This sympathy enabled him to produce many original illustrations.

Here are vital hints for the preacher. He must have warm sympathies, if he is to get near to his people and

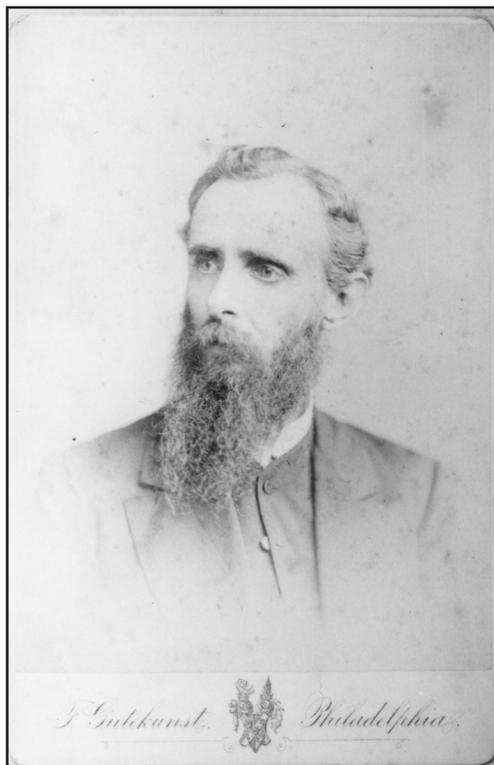
to have heart in his work. And sympathy with nature should be cultivated by every preacher. The Old-Testament prophets were deeply imbued with the influences from nature; and our Lord constantly drew on nature for His parables and illustrations. Here is a pattern for the preacher to-day.

To crown all, Dr. Witherspoon was a man of simple faith and devout piety. He came from a godly ancestry. He early devoted his life to the service of Christ in the Gospel ministry. The records of these early years serve to show how earnest he was in this purpose. He had strong and well-grounded convictions in regard to the reality of divine things. He was a firm believer in the Bible as the Word of God. He so received, and so preached it. His piety was simple, natural, and unobtrusive. His life was always marked by high devotion to principle, so that religion with him was not a mere sentiment.

Here, again, is an example worthy of imitation. The spiritual

tone of the preacher has much to do with the quality of his preaching. "Like priest, like people" here means that the piety of the preacher will in the long run determine the average piety of the pew. If the preacher is to retain his power, he must have piety as well as learning. No forced utterances about piety will avail if there be not a living fire on the altar of his heart. The preacher must ever keep this fire burning; and this piety must be deeply rooted in principle, so that his life may commend the Gospel which he preaches.

These natural and gracious endowments in the subject of this paper were cultivated by him with great care and constancy. He formed good habits of study in early days, and kept them up all his life. He did not think that when college and seminary days end, hard study may be given up. He not only prepared his sermons with great care, but he continued to read widely in all directions. The stores thus gathered he poured into his sermons. This discipline enabled him to do his work rapidly and thoroughly, and it also made his sermons



T. D. Witherspoon. Carte de visite portrait. Reproduced with permission of the PCA Historical Center.

fresh and instructive. He could scarcely be dull if he tried. He acquired an almost faultless literary style. His sermons are models of pure English, his conversation was always elegant, his articles for the press were clear as crystal, and his letters were always so correct that they were ready for the printer.

All of this is full of meaning for the young minister. Good mental habits, severe intellectual discipline, wide reading, patient methods of study, and thorough work on sermons are simply indispensable for the preacher of the present day. The dead-line is not so much a matter of years as of habits of study. That line is sometimes crossed a few years after the young man leaves the seminary; or it may not be reached at seventy years of age, as was the case with Cuyler and Storrs, now both over seventy. Unremitting study, constant reading and meditation, ever-increasing knowledge of the Holy Scriptures are the secrets of a growing ministry. If learning without piety makes a fruitless ministry, piety without learning is sure to make an ineffective ministry.

His Methods of Work

There now lie before the writer several thousand sermons fully written, and sermon briefs, and their perusal has been made with deep and pathetic interest. Beside the sermon books and manuscripts lie two books in which a complete record of his sermon texts and of the date and place of preaching is made. The last entry is No. 4,917, which may be taken to represent the number of his sermons. By following this record one can trace out the whole movement of his life during the almost forty years of his ministry. Some of the most touching entries are of the sermons preached when he was a chaplain in the Confederate army, mainly in Virginia. There is the record of one at Waynesburg, Pa., and another at Gettysburg, Pa., about the time of the terrible battle at the latter place. An inspection of this varied material reveals several instructive features of homiletical value.

There is everywhere evidence of most careful work. Everything about these sermons and addresses impresses one with the marked diligence and system of the work. Here are his first sermons, which were parts of trial for licensure and ordination in 1859-60, and they are in very perfect literary form, and very mature for a young man of twenty-three. Here are a dozen books filled with carefully written sermons, and for each an index, giving the text, with a fitting title for the sermon. The sermons on single manuscripts, and even the outlines of his prayer-meeting addresses, bear the same features of systematic treatment and orderly, careful work throughout.

Here is a good lesson for ministers young and old. A good systematic habit of working will save time and make the task lighter. Once in a while a genius may appear who can set all rules of order at defiance, but the average minister must be content with a genius for hard work, and a systematic habit is his best helpmeet in it. Let the young minister acquire this habit at the outset of his ministry, and he will master circumstances, and not be at the mercy of his surroundings.

Another marked feature of the materials before us is their strictly Scriptural nature. A good text, not a mere catchword, of Scripture is usually chosen, carefully expounded, and then its truth developed and applied in a direct and rational way. We do not observe a single case in which some topic of the times is taken for the sermon theme and a text gotten for it. The text is from Scripture, and its truth is brought out by careful exposition, and then applied to the conditions and needs of the time. This is a vital matter for the preacher to regard.

At the present day there is temptation for ministers to forget their true function. They are to preach to the times; but they should always be sure that the message they bear is not their own, but God's. To heed this will give directness and power to all preaching.

A further quality of the work before us is its expository character. In some cases there is a thorough exposition of some difficult texts, and in others a comprehensive exposition of connected passages. A series of sixteen sermons on the Book of Job, and one of twelve on the Minor Prophets, illustrate this feature. Much labor has been bestowed upon these expositions. They are so complete in both matter and form as to be almost ready for publication.

Here is a pertinent hint for the pulpit of to-day in regard to the nature and value of expository preaching. The people want to know what the Bible teaches. One of the healthful signs of the present time is this demand of the pew for the Bible, and the pulpit should respond promptly and fully to meet it. This means hard work, for expository preaching of the right kind needs more time and labor than any other. The careful and devout exposition of any book of the Bible in a connected way will do both preacher and people great good.

The work lying before us reveals great variety. This variety appears in different respects. In the selection of themes the whole area of religious truth and duty seems to be covered. The texts are taken from all parts of the Old and New Testaments. Doctrinal, evangelical, and practical themes appear in due Scriptural proportion. Biography, history, prophecy, parable, miracle, and promise all recur in ever-inviting variety as one turns

the pages of these sermon books. Christian privileges, the duties of Church officers, and the life and work of the Church are all presented in these sermons.

This is an important feature for all preaching. There must be variety in pulpit work, and endless variety, as the Scriptures exhibit and the needs of the people demand. With Christ crucified as the central theme, the pulpit should cause all its preaching to revolve in constantly recurring variety around this theme. Here is room for endless skill, inventive resources, and patient labor. But it will make the pulpit the minister's throne, and his ministry a constantly growing power.

Along with this variety we see adaptation in the materials before us. The themes were chosen to fit the circumstances. The sermons and prayer-meeting addresses are appropriate. His sermons to children, of which there are many, and on special academic and other occasions, are admirable in their adaptation. Those preached to the soldiers in camp, to students at the university, to people in sorrow and trouble, and to the plain mountain people are always peculiarly suitable. There is genius for adaptation always. This was one of the most marked features of his whole ministry, and never did it more plainly appear than in his later years, when, with a company of the seminary students, he went, during vacation, to the rough mountains of Kentucky to preach the simple Gospel to the people there.

This reveals a feature of his ministry that every preacher should strive to possess. Many a good man fails for lack of tactful adaptation in his preaching. A good sermon fails to hit its mark simply because the aim was not good. Endless labor, and careful study not only of the truth to be set forth in the sermon, but also of the audience to be addressed, are demanded.

There are striking courses of sermons among the material before us. Some of these courses are worth mentioning. One on the apostles and one on the prophets arrest attention. A course on some of the negatives in the Book of Revelations gives: No sin; No tears; No more pain; No more sea; No winter; No night there; No temple. Sometimes two sermons are coupled together so as to make a very vivid contrast: Crowns at the Feet; and Crowns on the Head. One series on "The Antitheses of Character" is so marked that it is worth quoting in full: I. Lot, A Worldly Choice; and Moses, A Religious Choice. II. Baalam, A Religious Sentiment; Caleb, A Religious Principle. III. Samson, Endowments Wasted; Gideon, Endowments Consecrated. IV. Jephthah, The Superstitious Vow; Ruth, The Religious Vow. V. Saul, Promotion without Piety; David, Promotion with Piety. VI. Solomon, The Seeker of Wise Counsel; Rehoboam,

The Despiser of Wise Counsel. VII. Jonah, Peril in the Midst of Security; Daniel, Security in the Midst of Peril.

This will serve to mark a feature of the work of the subject of this study which is full of suggestiveness for young ministers. There will be pleasure in such work, and its result will always be fresh and instructive to the people. Let the young preacher cultivate the habit of original research into the hidden depths of the Scriptures, and let him seek to exercise in a proper way his inventive skill in framing brief courses of sermons after the manner of those quoted.

Only a closing paragraph can be devoted to the method of preparation as revealed in this material. During the early period, for perhaps ten years, there seems to have been faithful writing in full. Then evening sermons seem to have been preached from notes in an extemporaneous way, but always with vigorous thinking through of the subject. In later years he preached sometimes without writing at all, and then wrote the sermon out afterward. This seems to have been the natural growth of a disciplined and well-stored mind. It affords a suggestion and a warning. It warns the young minister against dispensing with writing his sermons in the early years of his ministry, and it suggests that by patient effort a preacher can do his very best preaching without notes after severe reflection and careful mastery of all his materials. The subject of this study never read his sermons, and his example and advice were always against it.

"After he had served his own generation, by the will of God he fell on sleep." "And he being dead yet speaketh." ■