

LESSON XIII.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

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NEW YORK

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

1895

LECTURE XIII.

THE EXPLANATION : QUALITIES.

6TH, Continuing the discussion of the qualities of the explanation, we notice, as a sixth quality, unity of exposition. This is an exceedingly subtle quality. We may sacrifice it unconsciously.

(1) It is often sacrificed by the want of unity of text. If a text be a double, triple, quadruple structure, no oneness can grow out of it. Any discussion of such a text will resemble the rattling of a handful of marbles. This suggests one secret of failure in expository preaching. I once proposed to an association of clergymen the inquiry, what their chief difficulty was in such preaching; and their answer almost unanimously was "The want of unity." For this reason they could not interest in that kind of preaching, either their hearers or themselves. The problem is how to interweave the textual materials into one fabric. The sermon is apt to be a string of beads with nothing but the string to make them one. The preacher's instinct for unity of aim is balked at the outset, and the hearer's instinct for singleness of impression is balked in the end.

Where lies the remedy? I answer, it lies in limiting expository preaching to passages of the Scriptures which have unity of structure. Leave more desultory methods of exposition to Bible-classes. Reserve for

the pulpit only such paragraphs of inspired material as admit of unity of discussion. Search for groups of inspired thoughts. These are very abundant. Often, expository treatment of them is the very best that can be given, — the richest, the most original, the most interesting, the most useful. A young preacher's vexed problem of originating materials of sermons is solved when he makes the discovery of the inexhaustible resources of the Bible in unified passages. Many a group of biblical verses has as definite a unity as a constellation in the heavens. You will soon be surprised and delighted by your discovery of the extent to which the Scriptures can be mapped out in such groups. No preacher need despair of success in expository preaching for the want of good homiletic material for it.

(2) Unity of explanation is often sacrificed by a needless suggestion of conflicting interpretations. Sometimes a contested passage may need this method. In the majority of cases, however, it is not needed; and, if not necessary, it is impolitic. We have no occasion for our enemy's guns, unless we can shift them around. Why take the trouble to spike them even, if they can not be used against us? Homiletic policy does not admit that it is a matter of indifference whether hearers shall receive impression from one force, or from four. It admits of no such self-counteracting and disjointing process of instruction. A mind intent on one object does not work so. Such a mind marches to its object by one path: it chooses its own path: it shuts out all needless glimpses of divergent and opposite avenues. So far a preacher is an advocate, not a judge.

(3) Unity of explanation is also sacrificed by irrelevant verbal exposition. I have here in mind one of the most singular indulgences of pedantry that has ever

afflicted oral speech. It is that of hunting a word through its whole philological history in the Scriptures. A few instances occur in which the true meaning of a word is a growth which can be determined only by such historical pursuit. "Baptize," "ransom," "justify," "sacrifice" are specimens of such words. They are the crucial words of certain texts, some of which are the crucial texts of systems of theology. But such words are rare; and the usage to which I refer is not limited to them, nor to any choice selection. It has spread itself enormously, until, in some pulpits, it has become the stereotyped and only method of exposition. Critical commentary is thus imported whole into sermons, with no reference at all to any homiletic demand. The emphatic word, and sometimes a word which has not even the dignity of emphasis, is pursued with philological fury up and down and across the biblical records. Homiletically the result is a ludicrous compound of dullness and irrelevancy.

An example will most clearly define this error. You will see from it that my description is no caricature of fact. A Presbyterian clergyman in a Southern city once preached a sermon on these words, "It containeth much." The text was a fragment broken from a verse in the Book of Ezekiel, "Thou shalt drink of thy sister's cup: . . . it containeth much." The passage is a comminatory one addressed to the ancient people of God. The preacher, probably in that vacuity of thought which is apt to dilute the beginnings of sermons, pounced upon the word "it," which had the distinction of heading the text. He remarked, that, as the context indicated, "the word had for its antecedent the word 'cup.' 'Thy sister's cup: it containeth much: ' thou shalt drink of it; of thy sister's cup shalt

thou drink; it containeth much: a full cup, brethren, it containeth much: yes, thou shalt drink of thy sister's cup; it containeth much,—these are the words of our text."

I give you in the rough my impressions of the sermon after thirty years, not claiming verbal accuracy. The impression of the exposition, however, which has remained in my mind, justifies this inane mouthing of the text as the preliminary to the following exposition. The exegesis of the word "cup" was the burden of it. I do not exaggerate in saying that he told us of the great variety of senses in which the word "cup" is used in the Scriptures. A marvelous word is it. The Bible speaks of the "cup of salvation," and, again, of the "cup of consolation;" then it is the "cup of trembling," and the "wine-cup of fury." Babylon is called a "golden cup." The cup of Joseph which was hidden in the sack of Benjamin was a "silver cup." The Pharisees, we are told, "made clean the outside of the cup;" and, "he shall not lose his reward who giveth a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple." And therefore in the text we are told, "Thou shalt drink of thy sister's cup: it containeth much." The preacher rambled on in this manner, with his finger on the right page of the concordance, till at last the sound of the word "cup" was made familiar to the audience; and having accumulated, as I have in this paragraph, a respectable bulk of "sounding brass," the preacher announced as his subject of discourse the future punishment of the wicked.

(4) Unity of explanation may be sacrificed by erroneous representations of the "double sense" of certain biblical passages. This is a peculiarity of biblical style which it is exceedingly difficult to define clearly

to the popular mind. Few commentators succeed well in defining it to the clerical mind. Preachers may destroy the unity of impression made by the explanation of the passages in question, in either of two ways. One is that of distinguishing the two senses of the language too literally. The theory of the double sense, which some advance, borders hard on the Swedenborgian principle of exterior and interior interpretation. Senses absolutely independent of each other are attributed to the words of a text, with no reason for the double sense which is palpable to common sense. A recondite sense superinduced upon an obvious sense, a spiritual sense affixed to a literal sense, a prophetic sense subjoined to a declarative sense,—such is the “double sense” as a hearer obtains it from some pulpits.

The popular mind is impatient of mystic laws of speech, of which it finds no parallel in popular usage. It can not be made to see why two such interpretations should be injected into the same words with any more consistency or continuity of thought than three or thirty. The door seems open to Swedenborg, or any other maniacal interpreter, if such a theory of the double sense be recognized. The people, therefore, dismiss Swedenborg none the less, but the double sense as well.

The true theory of the double sense, as I understand it, always involves the idea of type and antitype. This is not undisputed, and I can not pause to defend it: I can only explain it. The senses of the language are not arbitrarily two: they are reasonably twofold. The reason is obvious. The language is true of the type, first for what it is in itself, then because it is the type of something to come after in the order of time. And to that antitype it passes over with an expanded

and a deepened meaning. Was a Messianic Psalm true of David? Yes. How? First on his own account and as a literal expression of his own experience; then because he was a type of the Messiah; and therefore its meaning passes on to a wider and profounder application to Christ. The one application is an outgrowth of the other. It is the prolongation, or, as the Scriptures so often pronounce it, the fulfillment, of the other. A certain continuity of thought connects them. Standing back of the type, we look through the language descriptive of it to the antitype, as if in perspective. They lie in the same line; the first being suggestive of the second, and the second the fullness of the first.

This is a conception of the double sense, — is it not? — which can be made intelligible to the popular mind without violence to its common sense. A reason is obvious why two, and only two, senses should be attributed to the language. It is a conception which helps marvelously the interpretation of some of the Psalms, and some of the prophecies of the Old Testament, and some of our Lord's predictions of the final judgment. I have called it a peculiarity of the Scriptures. To what extent it may be called a fundamental law of language in the interpretation of history is an open question. Natural science has revealed a similar law of type and antitype in the successions of natural history, which very strikingly reminds one of the double sense of the Scriptures. Whether or not it runs into all history in any such way as to make itself intelligible in the philosophy of events is an interesting query. That the Scriptures recognize it in certain grand responses between the Old Testament and the New is beyond reasonable dispute. Nothing of the style of innuendo, or of play upon words, degrades it

The same language expresses two things, because they are alike, and are divinely constituted in certain correspondences to each other in the eternal order.

The other method by which the theory of the double sense may be made to sacrifice unity of exposition is that of leaving the full sense of the text in obscurity. The difficulty here is a want of didactic vigor in the preacher. If he have optical vigor so that he sees for himself, he has not power to make others see through the media of his exposition. A cloud is left overhanging the text in any sense. Passages to which the theory of the double sense is applicable are difficult themes for the pulpit at the best. We may prudently defer the treatment of them till we are confident of our power to make them clear.

7th, A seventh quality of an explanation is that it should be as concise as clearness and fullness will permit. Whatever value conciseness has in any thing it has with special emphasis in expository discourse.

(1) Observe especially that in a topical sermon the explanation is a preliminary. Like all other preliminaries, it should be dispatched rapidly.

(2) In either a topical or an expository sermon, conciseness itself stimulates interest. It is an interesting virtue in the explanation of any thing, that it be given briskly. Condense. Make every word significant. Say nothing in a rotary way. Let every step be an advance. Hearers are pleased with you, and pleased with your subject, and pleased with themselves, if they find themselves able to seize your thought nimbly. Have you not been sensible of the difference in this respect between different expounders? One will pare and peel and slice and scrape a text, as if it were an apple. Another will crack it as if it were a nut.

With the one, you must bide your time: the other gives you no time to spare. You have no question which quickens your interest the more skillfully.

(3) In no part of a discourse is the temptation to indolent composition more insidious than in the explanation. The very nature of the process invites delay. We often dally with an explanatory thought when we should not think of doing so with a link in an argument. Even an illustration tells us more plainly when we have done with it, and motions to us to pass on. Nothing but exhortation equals the explanation in its allurements to long-winded speech. Some of the most decisive failures in expository preaching are due largely to its length. If any doubt exists as to the interest of an audience in an expository discourse, condense; pack your thoughts; shorten the process; make haste; come quickly to the gist of things; and you are sure of one element of success. This simple expedient will often save an expository sermon from falling flat.

(4) Conciseness of explanation is sacrificed in several ways. One is by explaining things which in themselves need no explanation. We shall notice again the pettifogging method of explanation. I name it now only as contributing to needless expansion.

Another method is by explaining things of which an explanation is not demanded by the use which is to be made of the text. The distinction which we have observed between the work of the preacher and that of the commentator is forgotten. Much that deserves exposition may not demand it now. No homiletic necessity for it may exist in the aim of the sermon: if so, no exegetical demand at present concerns the preacher or the hearer. Take, for example, the text, "The times of this ignorance God winked at, but now command-

eth all men everywhere to repent." Suppose that you preach a sermon from that text on the obligation of all men to repent. Why should you dwell on the phrase "winked at"? Why expand at all the principle of God's toleration of evils in one age which he condemns in another? Why say any thing of the first half of the text? Why not proceed at once to the last half as containing the germ of your sermon? It does so, and every thing back of it is, for your purpose, rubbish. Yet probably four out of five of the sermons preached on this standard text begin with a more or less elaborate discussion of the principle involved in the phrase "winked at." Why is this? Only because this phrase suggests an easy beginning. It points to something to say. It is the prop underneath the keel, which, knocked away, permits the vessel to launch. That is to say, the reason of the unnecessary exposition is vacuity of thought in the mind of the preacher. Keep to your text, not as an independent passage, but as a text. Use it for your aim, nothing more. Act the preacher, not the commentator.

A third method by which conciseness of explanation may be sacrificed is by dwelling needlessly upon things incidental to the text. Tediousness in the detail of familiar facts bearing feebly on the homiletic purpose unstrings the tension of interest in the early part of many sermons. Just then and there, when and where you need to accumulate and to husband resources of interest, this error often introduces a debilitating prolixity which makes the whole discourse flabby. Try the criticism on some of your own sermons. See if a brisk hint at the scenes of a very familiar parable is not of more worth to your conclusion than a laborious recapitulation of them. Make the experiment of

trusting something to the intelligence and the memory of your hearers respecting a miracle which they know by heart. "Mr. Jones," said Chief Justice Marshall on one occasion, to an attorney who was rehearsing to the Court some elementary principle from Blackstone's Commentaries, "there are some things which the Supreme Court of the United States may be presumed to know." Many an audience would give the same reproof to some expository preachers, if they could. Their defenseless position should shield them from assumptions of their ignorance which they can not resent. Be generous, therefore, to the intelligence of your hearers. Assume sometimes that they know the Lord's Prayer. Do not quote the Ten Commandments as if they had been revealed to you, instead of Moses. The Sermon on the Mount is a very ancient specimen of moral philosophy: do not cite it as if it were an enactment of the last Congress. The Parables are older than the "Meditations" of Aurelius Antoninus: why, then, rehearse them as if from the proof-sheets of the first edition? In a word, why suffer the minds of your audience to be more nimble than your own, and to outrun you?

A fourth method by which conciseness of exposition is sacrificed is by evasion of the real difficulties of a text. Explanation which is afraid of its own aim is apt to spin itself out in wretched commonplaces. Did you ever watch the last expiring spurt of an engine-hose whose power is spent? How it droops, and splashes, and wriggles, and drips, and drizzles, and spits, and gurgles, and wets everybody, sending a jet where it is least expected, and wasting its contents in puddles, until everybody frets, and is glad when it stops! Like that are expositions which expound nothing.

8th, An explanation should preserve the dignity which is becoming to the treatment of inspired thought. Believers in inspiration repel debasement of it in exposition as they do in the choice of texts.

(1) It is, therefore, a homiletic error to explain that which needs no explanation. This error not only destroys conciseness, but it chiefly offends the dignity of expository speech. It degrades exposition to putter over it in a pettifogging way, trusting nothing to the good sense of an audience, and assuming nothing as already known to them. On the text, "I am the good shepherd," said a preacher in the chapel of this Seminary, — and that after twenty years of experience in the pulpit, — "a sheep, my brethren, is a very defenseless animal. A shepherd is one who takes care of sheep." If a New England audience can not be supposed to know what a sheep is, what do they know? Simplicity in preaching is not driveling.

In gauging the intelligence of an audience, we must take into account the popular use of commentaries. Some of these have had an immense circulation. Barnes's Notes alone have been circulated to the extent of a million of copies. That which fifty years ago would have been an addition to the biblical knowledge of the people may not be such now. A serious difficulty attending expository preaching now arises from the familiarity of multitudes with the most significant parts of the Bible. He must be a learned biblical scholar who can add any thing to the biblical knowledge of some hearers.

(2) Another offense against dignity of exposition is the suggestion of fanciful interpretations. What shall be said of this example from Dr. Gill? In expounding the phrase "Abba Father," he remarks that

the word "abba" reads the same spelled backwards or forwards, and that "this suggests that God is our Father in adversity as well as in prosperity." Suggests to whom? To anybody but the Rev. Dr. Gill? We can readily conceive how it should have disgusted a robust mind like Robert Hall's, and led him to say to a Welshman who expressed the wish that Dr. Gill's works had been written in Welsh, "I wish so, too, sir; for then I never should have wasted my time and patience in reading them."