LESSON XIV.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

BY

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LECTURE XIV.

THE EXPLANATION: QUALITIES, LOCALITY.

9TH, Continuing the discussion of the qualities of the explanation, we remark in the ninth place, that over against the conservative principle of the dignity of exposition, considered in the last lecture, must be admitted another; namely, that exposition should be made interesting. It is a truism that dignity and dullness are often synonymous. Have you not observed that the act of yawning closes the inner chamber of the ear, so that you are partially deafened by it? That is as true morally as it is physiologically. We may, therefore, better tolerate a respectable eccentricity than be afflicted with tameness.

(1) To promote interest in expository preaching, cultivate the "picturesque expression" recommended by Lord Brougham. Regulated by a chastened taste, that will insure interest. Dr. Arnold is represented by his pupils at Rugby as having been in his biblical discourses the freshest man they ever knew. One of his pupils writes of him, "Our Lord's life and death were to him the most interesting facts that ever happened; as real, as exciting, as any recent event in history. His rich mind filled up the naked outline of the gospel." That was the secret, — "his rich mind." If a preacher's mind is filled with biblical stores, and cultivated

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in biblical tastes, and alive with interest in biblical history, biography, prophecy, so that Gethsemane and Calvary are as real to him as Waterloo and Gettysburg, he can scarcely fail to make expository preaching interesting.

(2) Certain expedients of study are valuable aids to the faculty of interesting exposition. Of these, one is familiarity with books of Eastern travel. A preacher should know something of the latest literature of oriental travel and exploration. A fresh mind must have fresh food. Another expedient is a study of the old English pulpit. Not for accuracy of exegesis, but for the means of clothing it in forms which will allure the popular mind, the old English preachers are excellent helpers. They were not trustworthy exegetes; but they abound with fresh illustrations, original uses of the Scriptures, and quaint remarks in the way of comment. The events and characters of the Old Testament especially were very real to their imagination. Familiarity with them will put a preacher in possession of much material of biblical illustration, which, whatever else may be said of it, was fresh and pithy and luminous. A quotation from that source may sometimes be the one thing wanting to light up a modern exposition, and make it interesting to modern hearers.

Again: a department of a commonplace book may be made a valuable help to the interest of expository sermons. Collections of biblical miscellanies, facts of science, incidents of travel, original comments, quotations, anecdotes, infidel concessions, uses of certain texts by illustrious preachers, uses of other passages on certain death-beds, notes of certain conversions attributable to specific texts, connections of other texts with Christian hymnology, missionary experiences in the

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use of others, — in brief, every thing of a miscellaneous character which explains, or illustrates, or enforces, or magnifies, or adorns any scriptural passage, is worth preserving.

(3) A preacher needs courage to use the common stock of expository thought. There is no need of straining after expository conceits. Here, as elsewhere, the common stock of thought is the great bulk of true thought. To the popular mind it is the most necessary thought: therefore, for homiletic use, it is the most powerful thought. Jeremy Taylor defends the simplicity of the materials and the structure of his sermons by saying that he cares little if any witty censurer shall say that he has learned from them nothing but that which he knew before; "for no man ought to be offended that sermons are not curious inquiries after new nothings, but pursuances of old truths." But Jeremy Taylor, in his expositions as in other things, was "golden-mouthed." He threw a gorgeous wealth of illustration around his "old truths" and simple plans of thought. Says an English critic, "We may compare one of his discourses to such a country church as we sometimes see in these days, where some loving hand has covered the simple work of village masons with carvings, and filled the old windows with prophets pictured on the panes."

Old biblical truths can be handled in this manner without conceits and without straining; and, thus handled, they are the elementary forces of the pulpit. A preacher needs to believe this. Trust the common stock of biblical thought, and use it courageously. That very courage lifts a preacher's mind to a loftier level of working. Faithful manipulation of such materials is the thing needed. Do not use them, in the

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bulk, at second-hand. Work them over. Reconstruct them. Polish them. Put them through the laboratory of your own thinking. Get fresh robes for them from your own emotions. Do something, or the other thing, or all things, which shall make them your own. Quicken thus your own interest in them; and the result will be, that, when they go from you, they will uplift hearers to the heavens.

In illustration of the principle here involved, let me cite a criticism by William Taylor, a contemporary of Walter Scott. Southey's "Madoc" and Scott's "Lay of the Last Minstrel" were rivals for the popular favor. In about one year after their publication Scott had received above a thousand pounds for the "Lay," and Southey had received, as he says, "just three pounds, seventeen shillings, and a penny." William Taylor, commenting on the contrast, writes as follows: "Sir Walter's great success surprises me. Yet he has this of prudence, that, far from scorning the ordinary, he dwells on *our* manners, *our* opinions, *our* history, *our* most familiar preconceptions. Goldsmith, the most popular of recent poets, is remarkable for saying well what was most obvious to say. Tasso is another dealer in finished commonplace, stolen, everybody knows where. The far-fetched is not ware for the numerous class of readers." This is a gem of criticism. The principle here advanced runs through all popular literature. The success of expository preaching depends largely upon it.

10th, The explanation should be free from certain scholastic weaknesses. In no other part of a sermon is a preacher tempted more insidiously to unconscious scholasticism than in this.

(1) We should especially avoid the needless use of the technical terms of philology. An exposition must

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often be more learned than it should seem to be. Never import into a sermon the paraphernalia of a critical commentary. A double reason enforces this caution. Such technicalities are not intelligible to the people; and, if they were, they are not suited to oral address.

(2) On the same principle, we should avoid needless allusions to the authority of manuscripts, ancient versions, various readings, and the original of the English text. The ancient conceit of English preachers in sprinkling their discourses with quotations from Greek and Latin classics was not, in their circumstances, so grave an error as the subjection of the Scriptures to scholastic associations in the minds of the people would be now. Yet that classicism of the English pulpit well-nigh ruined one entire age of that which was otherwise magnificent preaching. To test the principle one asks, "May we ever quote a word or phrase from the original Greek or Hebrew?" I answer, circumlocution to avoid a foreign language in popular oral speech is always in good taste. Say, therefore, "The word in the original which is translated thus," or, "The more exact translation here would be," etc.

(3) The principle involved in this rule should lead us, also, to avoid a pedantic citation of unfamiliar commentaries. Possibly a blatant caviler here and there might be overawed by the names of half a score of mediæval exegetes of whom he had never heard. But Dean Swift's advice to a young clergyman is more pertinent, when he urges him not to "perplex a whole audience of sensible people for the sake of three or four fools who are past grace."

(4) Yet this same principle should lead us to avoid the affectation of independence of scholastic authority. Never give a thrust at the principle of authority in

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the attempt to vindicate, or to exercise the right of private judgment. You have, perhaps, an original interpretation of a text: commentaries do not support you. Very well. Exercise your right; but why bray about it? Exercise it modestly: let alone the slaughtered commentators. Speak your own mind without disturbing theirs. It may be that you are right; but the probabilities are five to one that your hearers will not believe that you are, if you fling your opinion in the face of half a dozen venerable teachers who were venerable before you were born. Treat it as a misfortune if you must part company with *other* learned men.

The popular mind feels by instinct a more profound respect for scholarly authority than we often give it credit for. Underneath the current of democratic scorn of books and bookish men, there is an innate reverence for the thing which is thus depreciated. Another element, also, you will discover in the popular instinct on this subject; that is, a sense of a preacher's professional infidelity in such flings at scholastic tribunals. It is human nature to respect a man who respects his own order. It is natural that educated mind should stand by educated mind; that culture should respect culture; that cultivated taste should respond to cultivated taste; that scholarly opinion should defer to scholarly opinion. The thinking common people, who know enough to know what education is, feel this profoundly.

This popular instinct prompts respect for clerical fidelity to commentators. Illiterate men, when they are men of sense, like to know that there are libraries and universities, and historic monuments of learning, and magnificent traditions of ancient wisdom, and mys-

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terious insignia of intellectual authority, back of the pulpit. They do not care to see the libraries and the monuments; but they are glad to know that they are there, and that their religious teachers know all about them, and respect them. A parishioner who is a man of good sense receives a silent accession of respect for his pastor, and for every sermon that he preaches, from merely entering that pastor's study, and glancing at a large and well-used library. The very sight of books is an impressive spectacle to an uneducated man of sense. The man must be far down towards barbarism who does not take off his hat amidst such surroundings.

An educated preacher, therefore, who respects himself, is the representative of all the libraries to his people. The wisdom of all the ages is tributary to his sermons. No other man can be master of the situation as he can be, if he appreciates the situation, and respects his opportunity. He unites in himself the authority of his teachers and the sympathy of his hearers. He is on the middle ground between the heights of the university and the popular lowlands; he blends the principle of authority with the principle of sympathy; and that is a union of forces which no other combination of moral powers can equal.

11th, An explanation should, if possible, be in keeping with the rhetorical structure of the text. "This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality;" — what kind of an exposition, rhetorically considered, does this text invite? A preacher once introduced a sermon upon it by observing that the word "mortal" is from the Latin word *mors*, "death," and therefore means "deathly;" "immortal" is from the Latin words *mors*, and *in*, which means "not,"

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and therefore the entire word means "not deathly." Is the philological dissection of such a text in sympathy with it? Does it prolong and sustain the impression which the text itself creates? Another preacher, commenting on the text, "Now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face," pounced upon the word "glass" as containing the most transparent idea he could find in the text; and in his vitreous exposition he contrived to find a place for the fact that glass was first used for windows in the third century of the Christian era, and stained glass, for ecclesiastical windows, in the seventh century.

The question is, Has not rhetorical congruity something to say respecting such expositions as these? The principle is an obvious one, that a certain rhetorical sympathy ought to blend a subject of thought with thought on that subject. The same principle should, if possible, blend a text and its explanation. An exposition should, if possible, be rhetorically a prolongation of the text; it should make the same impression; it should be on the same level of thought and feeling. Sustain, if possible, the key-note of inspiration.

"If possible," I say: sometimes it is not possible. Three exceptions deserve mention. One is when a text demands only a verbal exposition. The definition of a few words may be all that it needs to put its meaning fully before the hearer. There is no place for a rhetorical expansion of it in the explanation. Another exception occurs when the use to be made of the text in the body of the sermon does not demand the aid of the text. The body of the sermon may be an independent discussion. The text may be a motto only. Having introduced the subject, the sooner the text retires from the discussion, the better. A third exception

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occurs, when to sustain the rhetorical impression of the text would neutralize, in whole or in part, the design of the sermon. This may be the case, as we have seen, in the treatment of "promising texts." An imaginative text may contain a principle which you may wish to treat argumentatively. The Psalms are lyric poems: yet they contain themes of sermons which we do not wish to sing. The beginning of the fifty-fifth chapter of Isaiah is an exhortation, "Ho, every one that thirsteth." But, in a discourse upon it, you may wish to elaborate the doctrine of an unlimited Atonement. In such cases your object requires that you should not prolong the rhetorical impression of the text. These exceptions, however, leave a large range for the principle, that, if possible, the explanation should be so conducted as to be in keeping with the rhetorical character of the text.

12th, An explanation should be so conducted as not to excite frivolity in an audience. Bishop Andrews, of the time of King James I. of England, took for the text of a Christmas sermon before the king the words, "That in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ." In his exposition occurs the following: "Seeing the text is of seasons, it would not be out of season itself; and, though it be never out of season to speak of Christ, yet even Christ hath his seasons. 'Your time is always,' saith he; 'but so is not mine. I have my seasons,' one of which seasons is this, the season of his birth, whereby all recapitulate in heaven and earth, which is the season of the text. So this is a text of the seasons." Perhaps you can make sense of this: I can not. One of the most useless modes of preaching is that which depends for the interest it excites upon

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the risible sensibilities; and the most offensive species of this genus of sermons is that which degrades the Bible to the antics of rhetorical buffoonery. Three radical errors are involved in such preaching.

One is that it almost invariably does violence to the biblical idea of the language used. That is rarely a truthful interpretation of the Scriptures which excites laughter. Moreover, the kind of interest which biblical fun creates is hostile to the main end of preaching. Spiritual success in preaching depends quite as much on the kind as on the degree of the interest it awakens. The interest of mirth at the best, and in its legitimate uses, can perform only what may be called a menial service, so inferior is it relatively to the more noble workings of the pulpit. The instant that it gets above that menial rank, it becomes an encumbrance and an offense. A preacher who depends upon it as the charm of his pulpit has his own work to undo when he would reach the conscience of his people. He is like an unskillful oarsman, who retards his own speed by constant back-water, for the entertainment of making the spray dance in the sunbeams.

Moreover, the interest of mirth directly associated with biblical texts is especially hazardous to the popular reverence for the Scriptures. We may admit, that in one or two instances, like the narrative of Elijah's mockery of the priests of Baal, there are biblical texts, which with vivid painting, and from the lips of a good mimic, might excite the mirth of an audience with no violence to the inspired thought; but the admission is no acknowledgment of the expediency or the right to bring other passages into mirthful associations. Texts are injured by such uses. The interest of conviction, of reverence, of penitence, of love, ought never to be hazarded for the sake of the interest of mirth.

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13th, An explanation should be such as to suggest a definite theory of inspiration. Homiletic exposition always involves some theory of inspiration. We can not, if we would, discuss the Bible as if the question of its inspiration were obsolete. Homiletic exposition must often disclose a preacher's theory of inspiration. If you do not define it in form, you must often express it by implication. When you do not express it, you will often hint at it. When you do not consciously hint at it, it will look out of the windows of your sermon, and show itself for what it is.

It is important to observe, therefore, that no indefinite theory of inspiration can live in the popular faith. The fact is a most significant one, that the popular mind never, to any considerable extent, enters into refined distinctions on this doctrine. It receives the doctrine in some strongly defined form, or in no form. Vagueness of teaching destroys the doctrine as effectually as flat denial. Exposition must assume it in a bold form. Undeveloped hints of it must suggest it in such form. If we claim that one text is authoritative, and another not, we must have a reason to give which will not seem to the common sense of hearers to fritter away from inspiration every thing that is clear, and every thing that is decisive.

Yet the pulpit may suggest ill-defined ideas of inspiration by expositions which are regardless of varieties of biblical style. You can not make biblical poetry dogmatic, or biblical argument imaginative, or biblical dogma figurative, or biblical history allegorical, or biblical allegory biographical, without teaching, by implication, ideas of inspiration which no man can so define as to save them from self-contradiction, and yet leave strong points to the popular faith in those ideas. To

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the popular mind such interpretations will seem to make the Scriptures contradict all the laws by which thought expresses itself when uninspired.

14th, An explanation should be such as to suggest naturally the proposition of the sermon. Dr. Ross, a professor of theology in Glasgow in the seventeenth century, published a sermon on the text, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." He states his proposition as fourfold: 1. To describe the different parties which distract our divided Zion; 2. To show the malignancy of the sin of schism; 3. To show the necessity of Episcopacy for the support of the concerns of Christianity; 4. To apply *the subject*. "The subject" here seems vast enough; but how shall the gulf between it and the text be bridged? Prefatory remarks may introduce such a proposition; they may introduce any thing. But how, from the point of the text, shall we discover the proposition? The firmament to be explored by our homiletic telescope is immense.

Yet does not this extreme case illustrate a defect of which, in less degree, we are often sensible in listening to sermons,—that the gulf between the text and the proposition is not bridged in any natural and effective way? The text is explained, the subject is introduced; but neither is linked to the other. With the text in mind we listen to the proposition with surprise: with the proposition in mind we recall the text with surprise. Observe, then, that a good explanation will often show that the proposition is contained in the text. If not this, it will often show that the proposition is naturally suggested by the text. The pertinency of an accommodated text depends wholly upon the explanatory transition from text to theme. No matter how brief the transition: if it be such as to build a natural

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bridge between text and theme, it is enough. A good explanation will often give to a subject the inspired authority of the text. This we observed as one of the uses of a text. The value of it often depends wholly on the exposition of the text. If it be so explained that it evidently indorses the subject, inspiration becomes responsible for the subject. The proposition may then be discussed as if it were itself inspired. This is the chief defense of topical sermons.

15th, In a topical sermon the explanation should, if possible, be such as to bring the text to bear directly upon the conclusion. It is often of great value to be able to use a text in the application of a sermon. To repeat it, to urge it home as containing the germ of all that has been said, even to show that text and sermon are in the same line of thought, and the application of one is therefore supported by the other, — this is often of great force in the conclusion. Occasionally the text forms the best possible closing sentence of a sermon. "Choose you this day whom ye will serve" may be the most forcible beginning and ending of a sermon on immediate repentance.

But I have said that this adjustment of explanation to conclusion is valuable when it is possible. Sometimes it is not possible; that is, it is not natural. The application of a discourse may flow more naturally from the body of the discussion than directly from the text. The applications may be divergent, not concentrated in one textual thought. A closing appeal may grow out of the last division of a sermon, and may be too remotely connected with the text to invite textual aid in its development. The expedient in question can not be forced. It must be the natural outgoing of the text as unfolded in the explanation, or it will fall flat.

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16th, The explanation should be varied on different occasions. A very obvious hint is this when attention is called to it; but often attention is not given to it. Have no stereotyped method of exposition. Do not always philologize by verbal criticism. Do not always explain descriptively. Do not always tell of the author of the text, his character, his condition, his history. Do not always speak of his readers, who and what they were, and why he wrote to them. Do not always cite parallel passages, nor always paraphrase, nor always pass rhetorical criticism on the beauty, the force, the logic, of the text. No one of these varieties can be always becoming: no two, no three of them can generally be so. We must have variety, if we have fitness: then we gain a virtue in variety itself. Any thing will caricature itself in the course of time, if it never varies. "Paradise Lost" would become ludicrous, if we should never hear any thing else. Macbeth and Hamlet would become comedies, if we were doomed to hear them rehearsed once a week, as people listen to sermons. Boys in the street would mouth parodies of them Respect the dignity of a preacher of the gospel enough to protect it from burlesque in your own person.

V. We have now considered the qualities of the explanation. Another general topic demands a brief notice. It is the locality of the explanation relatively to other parts of a sermon. This will vary according to the character of the sermon. In an expository sermon explanation forms the body of the discourse. In a textual sermon the explanation may often be divided. Each clause of the text being a division of the sermon, each may be explained in the development of its own division. Not that this will necessarily be so; but often it will be the natural method to introduce each part of

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the explanation in the place where it is wanted for immediate use.

In either a topical or a textual sermon the explanation may sometimes form an introductory division by itself. This will often be the natural method of explaining a very difficult text, or a text which is commonly misinterpreted, or a text which is severely contested Take the text, "I could wish myself accursed from Christ." You wish to discourse from that text on the passion of love for the souls of men. This is precisely what the text expresses. Yet to evolve it clearly from the text requires time. It can not be well done in a brief, preliminary fragment of a sermon. Very well: let the first division of the sermon propose to explain the meaning of the text; this serves the double purpose of giving time, and of attracting an attention which your exposition might not receive as a preliminary. But in a topical sermon the explanation will, more frequently than otherwise, be a preliminary to the proposition. If an explanation is needed in a topical discourse, it will generally be brief, and, as we have seen, is a bridge from text to subject.

Which shall take the precedence, — the explanation, or the introduction proper, when both are needed, in a topical sermon? As we shall see, these are two things. Which precedes the other, — the remarks explanatory of the text, or other remarks introductory of the subject? I answer, No rule is practicable: follow the homiletic instinct. Sometimes this will give the precedence to one, sometimes to the other, and sometimes it will intermingle them. The question is one of the minutiæ of sermonizing, to which criticism can give no more definite answer than this without hampering homiletic freedom.

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