

LESSON XVI.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

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LECTURE XVI.

THE INTRODUCTION: THEORY, SPECIFIC OBJECTS.

THE subject to which we now proceed in the further discussion of the constituent parts of a sermon is the introduction.

I. The theory of the introduction: what is it? In reply it should be observed as a preliminary, that not all that precedes the announcement of the subject is necessarily introductory. In exact definition we must distinguish between preliminaries in general and the introduction proper. For example, the exposition of a text is not necessarily introductory of the theme. It may take the place of an introduction; it may render an introduction proper unnecessary; but in itself it is distinct. An introduction might exist without a text: an exposition could not. An exposition might exist without a subject: an introduction could not. An introduction is a specific process, which resembles no other in the composition of a discourse.

1st, The theory of the introduction relates primarily to the mental state of the audience respecting the subject of discourse. There is my audience, here is my subject: how to bring the two together is the practical question. Every public speaker of much experience feels it to be a question, often, of great moment to his success. All good definitions of an introduction agree

in this, that its characteristic idea is that of preparation of the minds of the hearers. To secure to the audience a natural approach to the subject and to its discussion—this is the aim. No matter how this is secured, the process is the introduction. If you gain it without words, you have an introduction without words. This answers the inquiry, whether the introduction is always necessary in a sermon. Some reply No, and think that their experience justifies them, because they sometimes “dump” a subject upon an audience, without prefatory remarks, yet apparently without loss of power. But let us not dispute about words. Every speaker’s instinct teaches him the necessity of gradation in the progress of thought. His own mind has come to his theme by gradation: the minds of his hearers must do the same. With no rule on the subject, a speaker of prompt oratorical intuitions will feel this necessity of his hearers, and will adjust himself to it as best he can. Certain equivalents for an introduction exist, which may enable a preacher to dispense with the form of it in words; but it is because the preparative process is otherwise accomplished. That such a process is a necessity lies in the nature of discourse. To omit it would be scarcely less unnatural than day without a dawn, and night without twilight. Nature never wins us by startling and convulsive changes. These excite only our fears. Even brute mind distrusts nature in an earthquake. Gradation is the law in all agreeable mental processes.

This view of the general theory of an introduction suggests further that this part of a sermon is susceptible of fine rhetorical quality. Why, in announcing to a mother the death of her only child, would you select your messenger with care? Anybody can blurt

out the fact that a child is dead. The hangman might do that. But you desire a thoughtful announcement, a delicate announcement, a humane, sympathetic announcement. The same principle holds in regard to introduction of discourse. In it the rarest qualities of thought and style are practicable. It admits, often, of rare originality of thought. The best method of approach to a theme is often a discovery or an invention. The author deserves a patent for it. It admits, frequently, of condensed logic in its structure. Tact in hints of argument is often as necessary here as in the proof of a proposition. It admits of great beauty of illustration, and of finish in diction. The utmost delicacy of execution may be practicable and needful. Some subjects from some audiences can not get a hearing otherwise. When the prophet Nathan, at the risk of his life, sought to bring King David to repentance, his introduction cost him more thought than all that came after it. An accomplished preacher will disclose his trained mind and practiced pen as clearly in this as in any other part of a sermon. An introduction may be as beautiful as the morning; and it may be like Milton's chaos.

2d, The theory of the introduction involves a certain relation to the mental state of the speaker. Preparation of the audience is needful — for what? For a subject alone? Not so. A speaker's opinion on the subject may contain some unexpected peculiarities for which the audience may need to be prepared. The speaker's opinions, with all that renders them momentous to his own mind, are what is to be floated over from his mind to the minds of his hearers; and very much may depend on a smooth and rapid launch. But is this all? Possibly not. Preparation of the audience

may be needful for peculiarities in a speaker's methods of discussion. The subject and the results being given, a process lies between them which may demand preparatory forethought to enable hearers to follow and to accept it. Your method of argument, your style of illustration, omissions which you purpose may require prefatory remark to put your audience in the way of your line of thought.

Again: preparation is always needed to secure the sympathy of an audience with the effect of a subject upon a speaker's own heart. The work is but half completed if preparation is made for only intellectual results. You are not only in possession of your subject, but your subject has possession of you. You feel it: you are under the moral dominion of it: you represent in your own person the effects of the sermon you are about to preach. A vital object of preaching, therefore, is to lift the audience up to the same level of sensibility on which the preacher stands. Profound sympathies are never spontaneous. They start in preliminary emotions. A magnetic line may sometimes be laid down between the pulpit and the pew in the first five minutes of the delivery of a sermon, which shall vibrate with electric responses all the way through.

3d, We may, therefore, sum up these elements of the general theory of the introduction in the following definition; namely, that an introduction is that part of a discourse which is designed to prepare an audience for agreement in opinion, and for sympathy in feeling with the preacher on the subject of discourse. Two inferences from the views here presented deserve notice

(1) It is obvious that explanatory remarks on the text will often be an equivalent for an introduction. Some subjects once evolved from forcible texts, and

thus carrying inspired authority on the face of them, will speak for themselves, and speak for the preacher, so eloquently that he has only to pass on, without a word of purely introductory remark.

(2) When explanatory and introductory remarks are intermingled in a sermon, this should be done intelligently. The most meaningless, and therefore forceless introductions are made up of heterogeneous materials, which, probably, the preacher does not clearly recognize as one thing or another. When you are sensible of such homiletic vertigo, stop; let the brain clear itself; start anew, with clear insight into your bearings.

II. The theory of the introduction is always the same, but it has specific objects which are variable. What are these specific objects? Cicero says that the specific objects of the ^{*}exordium are ^{**}*reddere auditores benevolos, attentos, dociles.*" This statement is comprehensive, yet compact. I can not improve it. Seldom can any one improve a rhetorical statement by Cicero. He was that rarest combination of rhetorical powers, a prince of orators and a prince of critics.

1st, It may be the specific object of an introduction to secure the good-will of an audience towards the preacher, — *reddere auditores benevolos.*" Power over the majority of men is largely the power of person. Even physical presence is an important factor in the creation of influence with the popular mind. Men of large frame and erect carriage have the advantage over diminutive men in competitive labors. We unconsciously admit this by the very language in which we describe the large men. We talk of their "*commanding* presence." An instinct within us speaks in that phrase, — the instinct of obedience to a superior. Edward Everett used to lament that he could not

*** exordium, the introductory portion of an oration**

**** *reddere auditores benevolos, attentos, dociles,* - to dispose an audience to good will, attention, and open mind**

add four inches to his stature. In ancient times the Psalmist tells us that a man was famous "according as he had lifted up axes upon the thick trees." It is commonly mentioned as an anomaly which excites surprise, that Alexander the Great and Napoleon the First were small men.

Mental and moral qualities are more vitally represented in the influence of person. Do not the words of some men carry weight which you do not discover in their sentiments? The weight is in the men. Let an honest man honestly believe himself to be uttering an original truth, for the want of which the world is suffering, and, though you may find it in Æsop's Fables, yet the chance is that the world will ask with a sneer, "Who is Æsop?" and will believe in the man who is living to believe in himself. This power of person is no peculiarity of influence with the uncultivated. We all illustrate it in our own experience as listeners. Do we not all feel the force of a good elocution? Men of culture may be more quick than others to discover a cheat under the imposing exterior; but the imposing exterior carries weight with them as with others.

The ancient orators cultivated studiously this power of person in the exordiums of their orations, and in their preliminary discipline for public speech. The ancient taste seems not to have been offended, but attracted, rather, by a freedom of personal allusion which was often childlike. The ancient usage is no model for a modern preacher; but it illustrates the deference which the great orators of antiquity paid to the subtle magnetism of good-will between the hearer and speaker. Edmund Burke would have been pronounced by the cautious and painstaking orators of the ancient world a fool for his recklessness of all expedi-

ents of conciliation in the introductions of many of his parliamentary speeches. He aggravated hostility by defying it. He often produced it by inviting it. He gave occasion for it by assuming its existence, and answering it in kind. On one occasion he said, "Mr. Speaker, I rise under some embarrassment occasioned by a feeling of delicacy towards one half of the house and of sovereign contempt for the other half." Cicero would have pronounced him a savage.

This power of person with an audience is a legitimate object of homiletic culture. Why not? That is a false sentiment which prompts a man to say, "I will speak the truth, no matter what men think of me." Something of their respect for truth depends on what men think of you. Such is the divine ordinance of the ministry, that truth is never so powerful that it can afford to part with that alliance with the man appointed to proclaim it. No wise preacher, therefore, will defy a prejudice against himself among his hearers, or invite indifference to himself, by his neglect of any thing which forethought and self-discipline can add to his power of person.

Applying these principles to the subject of homiletic introductions, it should be further observed that a preacher seldom needs to construct introductions made up of fragments of his personal history. This ancient expedient, with rare exceptions, would be an offense in the modern pulpit. The general habit of the pulpit respecting things personal to the preacher must be that of silence. He needs the power of person which personal introductions are aimed at; no man needs it more: but he has certain advantages for gaining it which lie back of the pulpit. His personal character is known to his hearers: it may be presumed to be

favorably known. His reputation for intellectual ability speaks for him. His known history as a man of culture, as an *alumnus* of literary institutions, speaks for him. His reputation for piety precedes and introduces every sermon that he utters. Fortunately for every individual of the clerical order, the order as a whole has an accumulated history of qualities which commends it to the respect of men. That history is a common fund from which each one may draw, for his own use, of the power of person, till he does something which proves him unworthy of it. A preacher's chief cultivation of the power of person must be outside of the pulpit. In his home, in the homes of his people, in his study, in his closet, he must build up, in part unconsciously, the reputation on which the power of the man must rest.

Yet it should be remarked that every preacher must meet some occasions on which the introductions of his discourses should be devoted to the work of gaining the influence of person. He may be called to preach to an audience which he knows to be prejudiced against him. He may preach to another which is sublimely indifferent to him. Every preacher, even in the most retired and staid parish, will find that there are some subjects in regard to which, if he would speak, he must undo a personal prejudice, or remove a suspicion, or break up indifference, of which he is the object. He can be heard genially, it may be, on all subjects but one: on that he must charm wisely, if he would get a hearing which shall promise success.

That was not a wise man, who, in the time of the civil war, in a South-western State commenced a sermon by laying a revolver on the pulpit by the side of the Bible, saying that his life had been threatened, and

that he was prepared to defend it, as he would against a mad dog. A humble Massachusetts chaplain was his superior in homiletic tact, who was compelled by Gen. Butler to preach to a wealthy Presbyterian congregation of rebels in Norfolk, who were also in their seats on the Sabbath morning, in obedience to military order. Said the preacher, in commencing his discourse, "My friends, I am here by no choice of mine. I came to your city as a chaplain, to look after the souls of my neighbors who are here, as I am, under military rule. I stand in the place of your honored pastor by command of my military superior; but I am a preacher of the same Christ whom you possess, and I ask you to hear me for his sake." He had a respectful hearing for the next three months.

You can not foresee in what forms the need of such exordiums will arise; but every preacher in a long ministry must meet them, and his success must depend largely on his habit of estimating fairly, and cultivating in a manly way, the influence of person.

2d, The second specific object of the introduction may be to stimulate the attention of hearers, — "*reddere auditores attentos.*" Generally this is the chief object of the introduction: oftener than otherwise, it is the only object.

(1) Preachers labor under disadvantages in seeking the attention of an audience. The frequency of preaching is a disadvantage. No other public speakers speak so much as preachers do. The unchangeableness of their audiences is a disadvantage. It tempts both hearer and preacher to listlessness. The pulpit and the lyceum are sometimes contrasted in respect to the popular interest. You might as well compare vegetation with a cyclone. Nobody notices the one: every-

body is agape at the other. A lecturer spending six months of the year on one lecture, and delivering it to one hundred and fifty different audiences during the other six, is no model either of labor or of success to a pastor. Again: popular satiety with the subjects of preaching is a disadvantage to the pulpit. The great themes of the pulpit are well-known themes. The most necessary themes are those on which a Christian community has the most perfect knowledge. We must not ignore these themes; yet we must recognize the satiety of the people, and must count the cost of meeting it. Further: the indifference arising from the depravity of hearers is a disadvantage to the pulpit. The hostility of sin is less to be feared than the indifference of sin. There is always hope of an audience which can be aroused into a contest with truth. Dr. Johnson complained that one of his books was not attacked by adverse criticism. It is not the "hot water" of our parishes which we have reason to fear: it is the lead.

The pulpit needs to understand, and tacitly concede, its disadvantage as a competitor with other departments of public speech for the interest of the popular mind. The disadvantages are such, that competition is unreasonable. No intelligent critic will ask it of the pulpit: no wise preacher will attempt it. If he does, he ends inevitably by preaching clap-trap. Still the pulpit in its legitimate sphere may do much to commend itself to the popular attention; and this may be done, in part, by skillful introductions.

(2) Therefore an introduction should avail itself of the natural curiosity which hearers feel in the beginning of a discourse, because it is the beginning. The fact that it is the beginning pricks the ears. The first sentence of a sermon and the last are always interesting. That

preacher must have an ancient and sublime reputation for dullness whose hearers look out of the window when he begins to speak. It is wisdom, therefore, to assume the existence of the interest of curiosity, and to use it. It is always a safe principle to begin with an audience where they are. Do not go behind or below them in search of them. Assume, therefore, the interest of curiosity: fall in with it trustingly. Never tug at an introduction as a thing intrinsically spiritless because it is a preliminary. Never distrust its power to interest. Treat boldly the waiting eyes and ears before you.

(3) Again: the introduction should direct interest to the subject in hand. Assuming that an interest exists, give it an object. The bees are swarming: give them something to swarm upon. That object must, of course, be your subject of discussion. Chrysostom used often to announce the subject of his discourse on the Sunday preceding its delivery. His object was to pre-occupy the minds of his hearers with that subject, and that only. Whatever may be said of such an expedient, it gives a valuable hint. The introduction should guide the interest of the hearer in the right groove, to the right end. Therefore a series of disconnected remarks can not form an introduction. Such a series may be interesting. It may be original. It may sparkle with scintillations of genius. Thought, metaphor, antithesis, apothegm, every element of material and form which can fascinate a hearer, may be in it; but, for the want of coherence and aim, it is not an introduction. It leads nowhere: it ushers in nothing. Such prefaces are gay but meaningless arabesques. Furthermore: a preface which creates an independent interest of its own is no introduction. An introduction is a tributary. For the subject, and for that only, it exists. Therefore it is a

defect in an introduction, if it excites an interest which is confined to itself. This is sometimes the radical fault of initiatory remarks, — they introduce nothing. They are interesting; they are connected; they are discourses in miniature: but they transfer nothing to the subject in hand.

Again: a preface, which, though aimed at the subject in hand, does not reach it squarely, is a defective introduction. Such prefaces there are, of which criticism can not say that they are disconnected, or that they are independent structures, but only that they do not come fairly and fully up to the theme in hand. They fall short of it, or on one side of it, or strike beyond it. They do not hit the target in the eye.

(4) Therefore it should be further observed that an introduction should lead the interest of hearers to the subject in a natural way. Did you never listen to the announcement of a proposition which started the inquiry in your mind, "How did the preacher come at it?" Something is faulty in the exordium which leaves honest room for that inquiry. Every subject has certain natural avenues of approach. You can not search them out by more circuitous passages without loss. Our minds are not lawless in this respect. We can not help getting chilled in a North-west passage round the world. We choose, rather, the international pathway of commerce. That introduction is misnamed, which is only a literary adventure from text to theme.

(5) Again: an introduction should sometimes direct the interest of hearers to the details of the discussion. Texts will often suggest to hearers methods of discussion which the sermons upon them do not realize. Yet it may cool the interest of some hearers, if you allow them to anticipate one kind of discussion, and give

them another. Sometimes a text surpasses a discussion in solemnity, and the introduction must be adroitly constructed so as to carry over the interest of the audience from such a text to such an inferior discussion without loss. Theodore Parker once chose for his text the words, "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." It was soon after a presidential election, and the body of the sermon was devoted to a discussion of the prospects of democracy in this country. The introduction ought surely to have given the hearer some warning of such a leap as that. A superior sermon may not appear superior to a hearer who is disappointed in his expectations.

3d, The third specific object of an introduction may be to dispose hearers to receive favorably the sentiments of a sermon,— "*reddere auditores dociles.*" Men are often interested when not convinced, nor even predisposed to conviction. Theirs may be an interest of antipathy. The most attentive listeners to Dr. Lyman Beecher and to Dr. Griffin in Boston were Unitarians. The most deeply entranced hearers of Whitefield were men who came with stones in their pockets to assault him.

This suggests that the pulpit labors under a disadvantage growing out of the repulsiveness of many truths to the popular heart. We have before observed the indifference of depravity: its hostility is also a great disadvantage. The pulpit has large scope for sanctified tact in interesting unregenerate men in truth without awakening their latent enmity. If to awaken that is evidence of power, to win it over is evidence of conquest. In evading or conquering the hostility of hearers, much depends on securing the favor of an audience to the person of a speaker. If the man wins us, he will the more probably sway us.

Much depends on suppressing, by the introduction, the consciousness of difference of opinion between preacher and hearer. A French critic says that "eloquence consists in saying every thing without getting into the Bastille, in a country where you are forbidden to say any thing." Every hearer who dissents from you has a Bastille open for you in his own mind. Once get your thought lodged there, and no "reign of terror" can set it loose again. The early abolitionists, under the lead of Mr. Garrison, attempted to circulate a pamphlet which bore the title "The American Church a Brotherhood of Thieves." Was that a wise way to approach opponents? Yet some preachers have as rare a talent as that title displayed for a belligerent introduction of truth. There is a class of men whose chief impression in the pulpit and out of it is that of belligerents. If a subject of discourse can be approached in a militant way, they are sure to find that way. If there can be two opinions upon it, they are sure to advance one mainly as a shot at the other. If the audience can be supposed to contain opposers of a truth, such preachers instinctively present that truth as if it were a loaded musket. Unconsciously and blandly they fire at men in smiling ignorance of any other way of approach to them in public speech.

This belligerence of habit is the secret of a great deal of preaching at imaginary opponents. In many sermons we build our own cob-houses, and beat them down, and that is all. Nobody in the audience is hit. Yet that is a very effective way of creating a temporary opposition. Men will bristle up in self-defense, if we approach them bristling. Such an approach in preaching is as profound an error rhetorically as it is morally. An exordium should, if possible, discover common ground

between hearer and preacher. Always start on the common ground, even if truth compels you to leave it. It is not necessary to obtrude into the foreground the obnoxiousness of truth to a depraved heart.

A profound principle of rhetorical skill is involved in the apostolic injunction that the servant of the Lord should be "apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves." St. Paul himself exhibited a rare example of this rhetorical skill in his address to the Athenians. We are told that his "spirit was stirred in him when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry." A hot-brained, belligerent apostle of a new faith would have blazed out in a fury of denunciation. A man of fanatical conscience, in which there is always an element of malign emotion, would have talked of a "brotherhood of thieves." But St. Paul was too wise a man for that. "I perceive," he says in substance, "that in all things ye are much disposed to the worship of the gods. Among your countless altars I find one to the unknown God: Him declare I unto you." This was a most beautiful model of an eloquent introduction.

In an introduction much often depends on an appeal to recognized authorities. A genial atmosphere is made to envelop a subject, if a preacher approaches it by the aid of authorities which the hearers trust, and which lend to it dignity. Here lies much of the force of biblical references in an exordium. What are such allusions, but appeals to an authority which the hearers acknowledge? In this, also, consists the pertinence of quoting a popular proverb in an introduction. Proverbs are the concentrated wisdom of common sense. The voices of ages are given in them in reduplicated echo. The world recognizes them as an authority.

Indirectly, but often perceptibly, they win acceptance for a truth which might not otherwise obtain a hearing.

Much depends, also, upon a temperate expression of truth in the introduction. Extremes of opinion are not winning anywhere: least of all are they so in an exordium. Impassioned utterances which are natural elsewhere will seem to be extremes here. They need to be approached by gradations of interest. Varied statement, proof, illustration, all natural arts of style may be necessary as preparatives for the utterance of ultimate views of truth. Begin the discussion of bold opinions as the new moon begins, — with a crescent expression only. Leave time for their fullness to grow upon the perceptions of an audience. We all love to be approached with moderation. Paradoxical men are not winning men. The world entertains an extravagant estimate of those whom it calls “safe men.” It is astonishing what weakness, what folly, what commonplace will be endured in a public man, if he is only a “safe man.” Wise-acres are the most comfortable of men: only a keen and irreverent minority find them out.

Occasionally the aim of an introduction must be to transform an existing hostility to the sentiments of a discourse. The occasions for this are not numerous, but no preacher is free from liability to them. Some of the most notable triumphs of the pulpit have consisted in producing revulsions of popular feeling and in actually using the hostility of an audience as a tributary to the conquest of their hearts. This is not so impossible as it seems. A preacher in such an emergency is assisted by the tendency of excited feeling to produce its opposite. Laughter and tears often succeed each other rapidly in an agitated assembly.

This principle comes into play with peculiar force in aid of a preacher. Conscience, in men who are raging with bitterness towards truth, is always silently struggling against them. The spring is strained against its nature, and its nature is to seek compensation from the opposite extreme. Sudden conversions sometimes illustrate this, and are explained by it. Some of Whitefield's astonishing conquests of hostile audiences are explained, in part, on the same principle. The most marvelous evidences of Whitefield's power appeared often in the fact of his getting a hearing. He was the prince of preachers to mobs. He chose popular gatherings at criminal executions as favorable opportunities for preaching. In Wales he once came to Hampton Common, and found twelve thousand people assembled to witness an execution. A more brutalized audience could scarcely be found in a Christian country. Who could hope to win them to a favorable hearing of the gospel? Yet to Whitefield they furnished one of his great opportunities.

The expedients of a prepossessing introduction are, oftener than otherwise, adopted by an oratorical instinct. In listening to criticisms respecting them, like this which I have attempted, the response is not unnatural that they are cognizable by criticism only; that practically no one thinks of them in the construction of so brief a preliminary as an exordium. I must admit that this is, in part, true. Preachers who adopt these expedients successfully are apt to do so without premeditation. They do it in the exercise of the oratorical instinct. The power to work such expedients well is gained chiefly by the cultivation of that instinct.