

LESSON XVII.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

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NEW YORK

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

1895

LECTURE XVII.

THE INTRODUCTION : SIMPLICITY, UNITY, DIRECTNESS, CONGRUITY.

III. THE specific objects of an introduction which have been considered suggest, further, the inquiry, What are the most important characteristics of a good introduction ?

1st, Of these, the first in order and the first in importance is simplicity. Remember the mental state of an audience at the beginning of an address. They are unexcited. They are at leisure to criticise. They are waiting in suspense. Now, if ever, what is done should seem to be naturally done. Ease should pervade the whole movement. It may be elaborate, yet should never appear so. It may be original, novel, striking; yet, when uttered, it should seem the most natural thing to say.

(1) Simplicity in the introduction is obviously sacrificed by abstruse trains of thought. Abstruseness is relative. That which is abstruse to one audience may not be so to another. That which would not appear abstruse in the heat of the argument, supported before and after by a chain of reasonings, and to the level of which the hearer has been lifted by a gradation of remark, may be too obviously elaborate for the introduction. But the exclusion of abstruse thought does not

exclude profound thought from the exordium. Very much profound thought lies so near the surface even of the popular experience, that it is always within reach of the popular consciousness. It needs only to be stated in simple diction to be recognized and approved. The most profound truths of all real philosophy are of this character. The most philosophical aspects of religious truth are those which the popular mind instantly lays hold of when they are clearly stated. Power of sudden recognition of profound truth is no peculiarity of educated mind. It is a property of mind as mind. Deep calleth unto deep of such treasure in every soul. Such material, therefore, does not exclude simplicity from introductions, if a preacher will only be content with simple forms of statement. Let alone a philosophical dialect; seize such thought in its natural approaches to the popular speech, and be sure that the popular mind will greet it with a welcome.

(2) Simplicity of introduction is sacrificed by prolonged argumentation. Vinet mentions a sermon by Bourdaloue, which contained in the exordium the plans of three or four additional discourses. That could not possibly have been a good introduction. Lay no severe tax here on the memory of the hearer. Never seem to drag an audience up to the subject by main force. Therefore never seem to climb up to it yourself, as the railway car climbs Mount Washington, by dint of iron chains, and clamps, and cogs. If they break, what becomes of you?

(3) Simplicity of introduction may be sacrificed by the utterance of impassioned feeling. In the order of time, thought takes precedence of emotion, not emotion of thought. You must kindle the fire before you can use it. Therefore, as a rule, direct appeals are unsea-

sonable in an introduction. A direct appeal is an expression of feeling addressed to feeling. It presupposes emotive excitement on both sides. If thrust into an introduction, it involves a waste of sensibility. Dr. Nettleton was one of the most economical of preachers in his use of the hearer's emotions in the early part of his sermons. He has been known to stay away from the pulpit till after the hour of service, so that the audience might become expectant and impatient. Then, when he did begin, he was often lifeless; he hesitated; he drawled; he uttered truisms, so that he might get the advantage of the contrast when he roused himself to preach. These are artifices. In the pulpit they are affectations. But they illustrate the extreme of a sound principle. It is that of reserving the sensibilities of an audience till a place is reached in the sermon at which an appeal to them will be timely, because of the accumulated force of thought behind.

(4) To this general principle adverse to impassioned introductions, there are some exceptions. Reverting to the mental state of an audience as the test, we derive the rule, Begin on a level with the hearers in point of sensibility. If events have lifted their level of feeling, it will not do to ignore that uplifting: therefore sermons on exciting occasions sometimes demand excited exordiums. Sermons at the height of a religious awakening may admit of hortatory introductions. Sermons by a preacher whose illustrious reputation has preceded him, and has raised great expectations, may admit of such introductions. Sermons before large audiences may admit of the same, when before a meager assembly they would be frigid. Numbers create sensibility. The juxtaposition of a multitude is like the juxtaposition of burning coals. Therefore an excited

exordium before such an audience may be only on a level with their mood of feeling.

(5) An impassioned introduction should not be mistaken for an abrupt beginning without an introduction. The exordium of Cicero's first Oration against Catiline is often adduced as a case of impassioned exordium. It is not that: it is only an abrupt beginning without exordium. Not one word of that renowned invective is fitted or designed to prepare the audience for the subject of the coming discussion. On the contrary, the art of the orator consists in an explosion of his wrath upon the traitor, without forewarning either to him or to the assembly. He vaults into the subject by the spring of his anger. He flings it at the hearers as if by a catapult. The audience are trembling with passionate expectations. To begin at such a crisis with a calm and gradual ascent to the subject in hand would be like prefixing a classic exordium to the cry of "Fire!" In like manner, though rarely, a preacher is so pressed by exciting circumstances, that the question is not whether a cool or an impassioned introduction shall be chosen, but whether he shall have any introduction.

(6) One form of hortatory exordium deserves to be named as a more frequent exception than any other. It is that of asking for the devout attention of hearers. "Hear ye the word of the Lord" is the opening appeal of some of Isaiah's prophetic discourses. Our Saviour called the multitude, and said, "Hear and understand." St. Stephen, in his dying address to the mob, begins by saying, "Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken." So, at the present day, an earnest and brief, by all means brief, request that hearers will give you a prayerful attention may be in keeping with their mood.

(7) Simplicity of introduction is further sacrificed by

an obviously elaborate style. I say "obviously elaborate," because style may often be, must often be, the result of labor, when it has not, and ought not to have, the appearance of labor. Cicero says, "We must not depart from the familiar sense of words, lest our discourse *appear to be* prepared with too much labor."

For example, a succession of inverted sentences, a string of antitheses, a series of laconics, a protracted metaphor, studied changes of metaphor, elaborate involutions of style, an unusual vocabulary are features of a style too labored for an introduction. The difficulty with such a style is that it attracts attention to itself. Its rhetorical character, not what it expresses, the form, not the thing, allures attention. To be consciously allured, even by an excellence in style, to the rhetorical quality of it is an evil. Dr. Whately says that if an absolutely perfect orator could ever have existed, his hearers would not at the time have discovered that he was such. That discovery would have been an after-thought. Eloquence is necessarily unperceived as such. Its presence is invisible; its tread, inaudible.

To illustrate one form of this defect in introductory style, I quote from a sermon by Dr. Barrow, on "the profitableness of godliness." The preacher starts off in the following canter: "How generally men, with most unanimous consent, are devoted to profit, as to the immediate scope of their designs and aim of their doings, if with the slightest attention we view what is acted on this theater of human affairs, we can not but discern." This style is a fair imitation of the gait of a cantering nag. It is clumsy style anywhere, but imagine it as an opening sentence! Fancy the delivery of it! Who could escape with it the clerical humdrum?

We can readily believe the fact stated in the biography of Dr. Barrow, that he composed many of his discourses with no intention of preaching them.

2d, The second characteristic of a good introduction is unity.

(1) Unity of introduction includes all that is essential to oneness of impression. Certain ancient homiletic writers recognized three divisions in this part of a discourse: 1. The *exordium generale*, which was an introduction to the text; 2. The *exordium speciale*, which was a transition from the text to the subject; 3. The *exordium specialissimum*, which was an introduction following the proposition, and preparatory to the discussion. This is a fair symbol of many introductions in the practice of the modern pulpit. They are loose, disjointed, digressive, exhaustive. They are constructed on the principle of saying all that can be said. They make rubbish for the sake of clearing it away. A true exordium is always an aim and a shot. No part of a discourse should be more intensely one in its impression.

(2) Unity does not exclude from the exordium diversity of material. You may wish to dignify your subject, and yet to remove a prejudice, and, again, to explain a peculiarity in your method of discussion. Very well: these are pertinent materials for the introduction. But where is the point of unity? I answer, In the subject. All these objects of your introduction point inward to that. They are *radii* to a center; or, to change the metaphor, they are figures painted in one group. If critical taste can only fore-arm a preacher against talking at random in this diversity of remark, oratorical instinct will use the diversity in the service of unity. This is one of the *minutiæ* in which the

work of criticism is wholly negative. It simply checks rambling, and thus gives the oratorical instinct a chance to work. It will work as surely as the *vis medicatrix* will work when disease is once held at bay.

(3) The oratorical instinct thus assisted will commonly secure unity of introduction by subordinating all other materials to one. Materials theoretically equal practically fall into the rank of subalterns and chief. Two yield to one. The oratorical instinct perceives this, and it works as Joseph's fancy did in his dream: the inferior sheaves make obeisance. Criticism has practically no direct concern with it. It can only fend off intruding materials, leaving the instinct of the orator free to work its own way to unity of aim.

(4) Neglect of criticism, however, results commonly in double-headed introductions. The form which the want of unity most frequently assumes in this part of a sermon is not that of incoherent rambling, but that which suggests a wavering in the preacher's mind in the choice of a subject. He discourses, first as if one phase of truth were to be his theme; then as if not that but another though kindred phase; and perhaps the subject shapes itself at last as the result of the tentative process through which his own mind has passed in composing his exordium. He has had no controlling wind in his sails to carry him straight on in one course. The introduction, therefore, flaps first this way, then that. Criticism, however, can do no more than to point out the error, and say, "Fix the subject to start with. Define it. Stop that wavering of preliminary thought. Give your oratorical instinct a chance to work in its own way." It will always work in one way, and but one.

3d, The third characteristic of a good introduction

is directness of approach to the subject in hand. Recalling again the mental state of the audience, we observe, that, during the delivery of an exordium, they feel only the interest of expectation. This interest of expectation is from its nature temporary. It flags if it is dallied with. Hence the necessity of direct advance. Several things are needful to secure this quality of directness.

(1) The introduction should not begin at a needless distance from the subject. No defect of discourse is more frequent than that here indicated,—that the sermon begins in a nebulous remoteness from the real theme. How many sermons, think you, are written every year which begin in the garden of Eden? Something or other about the creation of man is the first thought. Adam is nowhere else so important a character, not even in the Turretinian theology, as he is in the introductions of sermons. Eve herself was not so essential to the blessedness of paradise as she is to the comfort of certain preachers in their homiletic exordiums. Long-winded introductions generally possess, in some form, this fault of antipodean beginning.

You will often find that the best beginning is in the middle of your exordium, and this by no hap-hazard. The first half of an introduction often represents, not the demands of the subject, but the disciplinary laboring of your own mind to come at the subject. It may have cost you by far the most toil; but it is the toil of mental apprenticeship. It is a great art, which does not come to a preacher by intuition, to be able to strike into the trail of a subject at the outset, just at the right point of ease in drawing hearers after you. Do not be economical, then, of first thoughts in the introduction. Let them go: give them wings. Their

worth is not equal to their cost. If you are to preach on the perseverance of the saints, it is not necessary to begin by remarking that we are all the creatures of one Creator. If you are to discourse on infant baptism, your theme does not hang on the story of the deluge. If your subject is the fall of St. Peter, it is not imperative that you must start with the fall of Adam. If you are to discourse on the end of the world, it does not follow that you must begin with its creation. Begin always with your finished thinking on a subject, not with your first crude attempts to grasp it.

(2) Directness of approach obviously requires progress of thought. An introduction should never return upon itself. It should never do that, which, in the chase, sportsmen call "doubling the course." Of one thought we should say all that is to be said connectedly. On the same principle, the exordium should never dally with a thought. To linger when a preliminary is finished, to pause as if we were delighted with our own work, to yawn as if we knew not what to say next, is indicative of any thing but an eager mind.

(3) Directness of approach requires as great rapidity of progress as the nature of the subject will permit. Progress we must secure always. The degree of rapidity depends on the manageableness of the theme, but it is always safe to press on. Make every thing clear as you proceed, but press on. This one thing do, forgetting the things which are behind. A paragraph, a sentence, a clause, a word, a syllable, which can be omitted, omit. Rapidity of introduction is desirable especially for the sake of brevity. Nothing but experience effectually teaches a preacher the value of brevity in preliminaries. Keep your eye open to it in your own experience. Watch your subjects: see how large

a proposition of them are more deftly introduced with few remarks than with many. Watch your audiences: see how fresh they are for a discussion where you have not wearied them with a long exordium. Watch your own mind: see what a sense of conquest you have when you have come up to a proposition by a quick march.

Rapidity of approach is desirable also as a stimulus to interest. It is a stimulus to the preacher. Rapid movement in composition exhilarates like riding a spirited horse. On the same principle, a rapid introduction is a stimulus to the hearer. Once get the idea into his mind that you do not mean to waste words, and he will not waste attention. He will hear with the same alertness of mind with which you speak. Rapidity of approach to a subject is desirable, furthermore, for the confidence which it wins from hearers in the preacher's mastery of the subject. Napoleon's soldiers trusted him as much for the tremendous marches which he gave them as for the battles in which he led them. They used to say, that, under his leadership, victory was due as much to their legs as to their arms. On a similar principle we trust or distrust a speaker. His quick approach to a theme, if it be clear, is a sign of mastery. We trust him for the business-like way in which he executes the first movement.

(4) Directness of approach is not abruptness. One preacher announces his text, and then remarks, "Without further introduction I invite your attention to the following theme." This is misnamed an introduction. Not a word is uttered preparatory to the subject. We come to the subject by no gradation, but by a leap. If you will observe honestly the inducement to an abrupt beginning, you will find that it is not any homiletic

advantage, but mental vacuity. We adopt it only as a device of ease. Yet directness of introduction admits of exceptions. Eloquence has room for adroitness, if you please to call it such, in the structure of exordiums. Obnoxious doctrines, difficult discussions, special occasions, peculiar relations of speaker to theme and of speaker to hearers may demand such exordiums, and to withhold them for religious reasons is simply not good sense. You might as reasonably refuse to sail obliquely against a head-wind, because oblique sailing resembles deception.

4th, The fourth characteristic of a good introduction is congruity with the character of the sermon.

(1) This requires that the introduction be characteristic of the subject in hand. This suggests the point of defect in many textual exordiums. You will find it to be sometimes the secret of a heavy exordium, that the text has suggested general religious ideas not explanatory of its meaning, not needed by the coming subject, yet good in themselves; and therefore your pen has dropped them as it passed along. They burden the introduction, as scattered barley is a nuisance in a field of wheat. Have you not detected procrustean introductions of this character, in which the preacher seems to have aimed, not to say only necessary things, but to make the introduction of a given length, no more, no less? Of such material as he has, he might add a page or subtract a page, prefix a page or append a page, insert a page or intersperse a page, and it would make no difference, except to change the measure. The subject would neither gain nor lose.

(2) Indolent composing produces incongruous introductions. Are you never afraid of your subject, loath to attack it at once, fain to linger in its out-

skirts, pleased to dally with straggling thoughts which occur to you without effort? In such moods your style of thinking is not intense. You do not glow with the consciousness of a heated theme within. You muse, but the fire does not burn. You feel none of that necessity of production which Dr. Arnold said he often had in reflecting upon the political and social state of England. "I must write," he exclaimed, "or I shall die." Writing then, there, on that theme, he would inevitably have introduced his theme in some intensely characteristic way. Dr. Holmes represents one of his clerical characters as publishing a book of which the title is "Thoughts on the Universe." Similar to this are the introductions composed by a mind which feels no sense of the necessity of delivering itself of a burning theme. Such a mind acts indolently. Its work is discursive and slow. It will be but an accident of authorship if the result is otherwise. True, a man can not feel himself on the verge of syncope in every introduction that he composes: but some sort of necessity must crowd him, growing out of the inspiration of his theme.

(3) Congruity of introduction requires that it be true to its own character as a tributary. "An exordium," says Cicero, "is only the porch." In this respect, congruity may be sacrificed by excessive length. Dr. Johnson has a lay-sermon one-half of which is introductory. This is a temple one-half of which is vestibule. Entire relevance of material does not redeem an introduction of this kind. Disproportion is itself incongruous. Raciness of material is no compensation for prolixity. If it is not interesting as a tributary to the subject, the greater the interest, the greater the incongruity.

(4) The congruity of an introduction may be sacrificed by its superiority to the rest of the sermon in rhetorical qualities. If it is more original in thought, or more brilliant in imagery, or more beautiful in diction, or more stimulating in historical or biographical allusion, or more compactly finished in structure, what is the effect? It is that the discussion flags in the sequel. Instead of rise of interest, you have a fall. Have you not sometimes been sensible of an ebbing of interest after an introduction in which a very stimulating anecdote was told? Through the whole discourse the tide never reached again the high-water mark of that anecdote. There was no more of absolute stillness in the audience, or other evidence of entranced attention. The stimulus of the introduction, whatever be the source of it, should be proportionate to that of the discussion, and therefore must be inferior to it. A sermon should never be remembered by the splendor of its exordium.

(5) Congruity of introduction may be sacrificed by anticipating in it materials which belong to the main body of the sermon. The proper locality of materials in a sermon is a matter requiring very delicate adjustment. Vital forces may depend on the question of location. Even the decision of logical instinct is sometimes neglected. An introduction is sometimes so formed, that the proposition follows from it as a conclusion from premises. The preacher affirms that this is true, and that is true, and the third is true; and therefore the proposition follows. Then he proceeds in his discussion to prove his proposition. The first division, perhaps, explains it; but the second proves it. What is the defect here? It is that of an incongruous location of materials. The introduction has been related

to the proposition as premise to conclusion. The proposition has been proved at the outset, and now it is proved again in the sequel. The introduction has pilfered from the discussion.

In other cases, rhetorical instinct must decide the question of location. Here a more delicate culture is requisite. Shall a didactic paragraph appear as a preliminary, or in the application? Shall an original thought be used in the introduction, or reserved for the discussion? What shall we do with a capital illustration? The logical connections may not be decisive. Rhetorical considerations must settle the question. The introduction should lay claim to nothing which will serve the purpose of the sermon more effectually elsewhere.

(6) The congruity of the introduction requires that it should resemble the body of the sermon sufficiently to suggest it. The first impression which the front of St. Peter's at Rome makes upon a spectator does not suggest to him a church. The architecture of the grand façade is not that of a place of worship, but rather of an immense palace, — rich, gorgeous, imposing, but still a palace, — not a cathedral. Not unlike this is the impression of the introductions to some discourses. They naturally suggest something else than the discourses they precede. The vestibule and the temple do not match well. The result is like that of the juxtaposition of unsympathetic colors.

If, therefore, you have a superlative theme of discourse, and if your thought and style approach its magnificence in your treatment of it, let your introduction give intimation of this. Let logic usher logic. Let beauty herald beauty. Let grandeur prefigure grandeur. Let solemnity foreshadow solemnity. This is as

natural as that the primary rainbow should reflect itself in the secondary one in the sky. If this kind of congruity is too ethereal a grace for criticism to create, yet criticism does much if it recognizes the authority of the oratorical instinct, and defends it.

(7) Congruity of introduction demands also, that, if possible, it shall cover every thing in the sermon which needs introductory remark. That is, every thing in the discourse which needs any preparatory work should, if possible, be prepared for at the beginning. This comprehensiveness of exordium is aimed mainly at the prevention of two defects. One is the omission of some preparatory remark which is needed for subsequent uses. Great force is often gained by making a conclusion seem to return upon and illustrate and use truths with which the sermon began. As a text may be thus used with effect, so also may introductory principles. Why did Mr. Webster, at the close of his celebrated imitation of the eloquence of John Adams, reiterate the language of the exordium? Why say, "I leave off as I began: 'Sink or swim, live or die,' etc."? He did it in unconscious obedience to the oratorical instinct which invented this expedient for reduplicating impression. It is often worth very much to be able to leave off as you began.

If you will study critically the works of Sir Walter Scott, you will often find a singular compactness of structure connecting his beginnings with his endings. The beginnings are preparatory to the endings, and the endings throw back a light upon the beginnings. A perfect discourse will often have a similar plot in its construction. Its introduction is a storehouse of materials which do not fully disclose their design till the conclusion returns upon and appropriates them. When

a sermon has this unique and compact structure, the introduction and conclusion are like the buttresses of a suspension-bridge. One is as necessary as the other, and they support all that hangs between. I am aware that this may seem fanciful when stated thus as a point in homiletic theory; and to prove it by illustration would be tedious. Yet you will all experience illustrations of it in your own sermons. Your oratorical instinct will much more frequently construct such retrospective conclusions, if your introductions are so comprehensive as to make it possible to "leave off as you began."

The other defect which a complete introduction will prevent is that of a cumbrous interspersion of preliminaries in the body of a sermon. By observing critically the structure of sermons, you will often discover a multitude of remarks scattered here and there, which are strictly introductory in their character. Their bearing is preparative entirely: they have no other purpose. Now it is to explain, then to excite attention, again to dignify the subject; to do, in a word, just that which it is the aim of the introduction to do. Some discourses are marked by nothing else so strikingly as by the abundance of these interspersed preliminaries. Some of them must be interspersed; but the large majority can be, and ought to be, packed into the introduction.

It should therefore be a study to say in the exordium as nearly as possible every thing of a preliminary nature which must be said anywhere. Clear the deck thus for action. Sermons which are begun without an introduction are, in the majority of cases, laden with interspersed encumbrances; and their utterance in the body of the sermon commonly requires more time than if they are given in their proper place in the exordium.