

LESSON XX.

THE

# THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

BY

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## LECTURE XX.

### THE PROPOSITION : DEFINITION, NECESSITY.

THE proposition is that part of a discourse by which its subject is defined. It includes, therefore, but is not restricted to, that which is termed proposition in the nomenclature of logic. It embraces all varieties of rhetorical form by which a subject is indicated to the audience. An interrogative may be in rhetorical dialect the proposition of a sermon.

I. Upon this latitude in the signification of the term depends the answer to the first question which meets us in the discussion of the thing; namely, Is the statement of a proposition necessary to the completeness of a discourse? Let us understand clearly the limits of the question. It is not whether a point to be proved is essential in every discourse; it is not whether the most scholastic form of statement is necessary to the proposition; it is not whether any single form of statement should be invariable in the proposition. The only point of inquiry on which difference of opinion can exist is this, Should the subject of a sermon invariably be so stated as to make hearers sensible at the moment that the subject is defined?

In discussing this inquiry, I aim at three things. One is to establish the affirmative; another and more essential one is to illustrate the vitality which inheres

in this very brief fragment of a sermon; and the most essential of all is to vindicate that style of thinking in the pulpit to which a definite statement of propositions and divisions is a necessity. I say propositions and divisions, because the practical question covers both; and we shall avoid repetition by considering once for all those bearings of it which concern the style of thinking in the pulpit which divisions, as well as propositions, represent.

It may seem disproportionate to discuss in a succession of lectures a fragment of discourse which may occupy but a single line in the writing, and less than a breath in the delivery. But the disproportion is like that of treating by an octavo volume of medical discussions only the single topic of an organ of the body which you can hold in the palm of your hand. The proposition is to the discourse what the heart is to the physical system. The relation is organic. Because it is so, the question of statement or no statement can not be fairly dismissed as a question of form only. It is a question of the inner quality of preaching. Decide it in one way, and you decide in sympathy with shallow and effervescent preaching. Decide it otherwise, and you cultivate thoughtful, solid, elemental preaching. This will be obvious from a consideration of the following particulars.

1st, The oratorical instinct of a good speaker demands that he shall have a proposition. Expressed or latent, the proposition must exist. We acknowledge this in the demand which we make upon every speaker, that he shall "speak to the point." What point?

2d, The instinct of good hearing demands, on the same principle, that a speaker shall state his proposi-

tion. For what purpose does a speaker need to have a proposition for which the hearer does not also need the statement of the proposition? There is a hearing to the point, which is correlative to speaking to the point. The eye follows the arrow most easily if it sees the target.

3d, It lies especially in the nature of a spoken address that it needs a statement of the theme. If an essay written might dispense with this, not so a speech delivered. In hearing, do we not instinctively, and soon after the commencement of an address, ask ourselves, What would the speaker be at? what is the aim? where is the target? If it seems to be concealed, are we not restless till it is discovered? This mental experience of a hearer is only the silent demand made upon the preacher that he shall not only have a proposition, but shall announce it. The instinct of hearing and the instinct of speech, in this respect, are of one mind.

4th, The popular mind is peculiarly dependent on knowledge of the theme as an aid to unity of impression. Performers on the tight-rope steady their whole muscular system by fixing the eye intently on a point in the distance. Thus they cross a ravine where the wavering of the eye might be death. Not unlike this is the mental effort by which the common mind must often follow the mental operations of its superior. The knowledge of the subject at the outset will be to the power of attention what the fixed eye is to the muscles of the gymnast.

5th, The subjects of the pulpit are in their nature liable to confusion in the popular conceptions of them. At this point the inquiry before us ceases to be a question of forms: it deepens into a question of things.

Let the following particulars be observed, in the way of *excursus* from the question of form into the thing which it represents.

(1) The common mind is burdened with the sense of sameness in the discourses of the pulpit. No other criticism of the pulpit is so common as this, "The preacher repeats himself. He is for ever reiterating the old story." This does not always imply fault in the preacher. Hearers judge of sermons by their own consciousness of the effect of sermons. Sameness of effect is often, in their judgment, equivalent to sameness in materials. If the shot fall fast and long in one spot, they lose the sense of succession in the sense of continuity. The tendency, therefore, is to a fusion of the popular conceptions of truth. Such fusion is confusion. Thoughts on religious themes run together, and themes themselves are blended in the popular theology.

(2) The tendency to confusion of religious thought often increases with the excitement of religious emotions. Nothing in the nature of religious sensibility protects it from that law of mind by which thought and emotion are often in inverse proportion. Hence revivals of religion are in one aspect occasions of unusual peril to religious character. This is especially true, if revivals occur under the lead of uneducated or incautious preachers. President Edwards thought it necessary to publish his work on "The Religious Affections," as a corrective of errors, and a protection against dangers, into which the churches of New England were falling. Such errors and dangers were involved in an indiscriminate interest in religion, arising from the disproportion between emotive excitement and thoughtful convictions in the experience of converts. Audiences

which Whitefield addressed were sometimes swayed by the mere infection of sympathy to the very circumference of the twenty thousand in the field, when it was physically impossible, in the case of thousands, that they should have heard one word from the preacher's voice.

Hume relates, that he was present on one such occasion, when the audience was so immense and so restless, that no human voice could have been intelligibly heard by them all. He wandered to the outskirts of the crowd in amazement at the evidences of emotion which met him at every step. He paused at length by the side of a woman who was weeping piteously, and inquired, "My good woman, what are you crying for?" — "O sir! for the parson's sermon." — "But can you hear what the parson is saying?" — "No, sir." — "Have you heard any thing since he began?" — "No, sir." — "Pray tell me, then, what for do you cry?" — "O sir! don't you see that holy wag of his head?"

(3) One part of the mission of the pulpit, therefore, must be to divide and define and identify religious thought in the popular experience. Preaching ought to educate the religious sensibilities of the people, as well as to stimulate them. You perform a work of questionable usefulness, if you only awaken those sensibilities, and then leave them to take care of themselves. They will crystallize about something; and if you do not furnish the right thing, error, weakness, depravity, and Satan will always be at hand with the wrong thing. Preaching ought to break up the conglomerate in which thought and feeling, error and truth, spiritual power and animal magnetism, divine suggestion and Satanic temptation lie molten together. Men need to be taught by the pulpit to know what they believe, and why they feel, what emotions are

legitimate to one truth, and what to another, and why they differ. Truths need to be individualized by analytic preaching. Only thus can the popular experience of them be deepened by discriminating knowledge.

It deserves to be noticed here, that, in our own day, there is comparatively little questioning of the spirit of revivals. The pulpit commonly welcomes them, and assumes that they are the work of God. To doubt this, and to express that doubt, expose a pastor to suspicion of his consecration to the Lord's work. Sometimes pastors find themselves borne along by a tide of popular feeling, of the purity of which they entertain serious doubts. They see evils which they dare not condemn, lest they should be thought to be opposers of revivals and of the men who are their conspicuous leaders. They see converts but half converted, men coming into the Church with false or infirm ideas of sin and regeneration and atonement. President Edwards did a courageous thing, when, as an antidote to the very same class of evils which we often witness, he published his work on "The Religious Affections." When has a similar work appeared in our day? Many pastors who have attempted to apply similar correctives of popular excitement from their pulpits have met with the rebukes of evangelists, and have been silenced by their misguided people.

It is one of the perils of evangelism, which requires skill and courage in the encounter, that the conspicuous instruments of a revival originated under such instrumentalities do not and can not apply the educating influences which every revival creates the need of. I say can not, because the educating work is a work of time. That work is turned over to the hands of pastors: it is a work not of stimulation, but of discipline:

not of emotion, but chiefly of instruction, — a work unsupported by the sympathy of large assemblies, the novelty of strange voices, and the *éclat* of special measures. Thus it often subjects pastors to the severest trials of their patience and their faith. Foresight of this after-work following a religious excitement produced by other agencies than that of the settled pastor should always be taken into account in deciding upon the expediency of importing evangelistic labor as an aid to the permanent pulpit.

Yet very many of the dangers of this class may be avoided, or at least safely encountered, if the work of the permanent pulpit is what it ought to be in point of instructive and discriminate preaching. To a people thus trained under an educating pulpit, revivals of religion may come and go as the most natural process of religious experience, creating no morbid excitement, and leaving behind them no perils to be feared, and no evils to be corrected. They may be as natural as the tides, — themselves a purifying agency, instead of needing, as actual revivals often do, to be themselves purified. To a people educated by such a ministry, evangelists may come and go as auxiliaries, instead of revolutionists.

6th, Returning, now, to the question of rhetorical form immediately before us, I remark with emphasis, the fact, that, to achieve this education of a people, preaching must use freely the expedients by which a logical mind naturally makes itself understood in the expression of strong thought on great themes. We must generalize less, and analyze more; exhort less, and argue more. We must divide and isolate, and specify and concentrate our most profound conceptions of elemental truths. That kind of preaching to which



a free use of the expedients of logical expression is a necessity is the only preaching by which the pulpit can accomplish its work as an educating power.

Therefore preach very little in the general, and very much in the detail. Preach little on truth, and much on truths. Preach rarely on religion, but constantly on the facts, the doctrines, the duties, the precepts, the privileges, of religion. Divide, discriminate, define, sharpen, clarify, doctrine by doctrine, duty by duty, fact by fact, till the whole map of Christian faith is outlined and clear. You thus gain the power of pointed preaching. Thought will take the precedence of feeling, and intelligent action will be the resultant of both. The final product which you accumulate and build up will be not beliefs alone, not sensibilities alone, but character in those forms in which character is power. Your church will become to the religious world what any other body of men of character is to the secular world,—a consolidation of forces, and a power of control.

7th, The use of that class of expedients to which definite propositions belong, and of that kind of preaching to which they are a necessity, tends to form and consolidate the theological faith of a people. This illustrates in another aspect what I mean in saying, that, in some relations of it, the question ceases to be one of forms, and becomes one of things. Dr. Lyman Beecher accomplished more for the evangelical faith in Boston by his bony sermons than by all other expedients of his pulpit. They were not graceful discourses; they were not literary discourses; they were not classically finished discourses (they would have been improved if they had been all these); but they were definite discourses. They reined up hearers to specific think

ing. They made them see that the preacher was aiming at something. It was impossible to mistake what and where the target was. In this respect his sermons were in striking contrast with those of his opponents, whose antipathy to an angular theology expressed itself in smooth and rounded rhetoric, which presented to the popular conscience no protuberances of thought, no points of convergent force, and therefore no centers of burning power. The fruits of the two methods of preaching have entered into the history of New England, and are known and read of all men.

The question, then, of the formal statement of the themes and the salient thoughts of sermons, is not a question of taste only. Still less is it a question of forms only. It affects vitally a policy of thought; and its decision is an index of a policy in preaching, upon which success depends. To achieve that success, you must have constructive methods; for constructive methods, you must have a positive faith; and for a positive faith, you must have centers of discussion which shall be visible. To make these centers visible, you must make them luminous; to make them luminous, you must have definite statements of them which shall penetrate the understanding, and remain in the memory. In no other way can you get possession of available forces with which to work upon the popular life.

All this comes by intuition to a live man who understands his mission in the pulpit. Yet even such a man may hang a mill-stone around his own neck by cultivating an antipathy to the natural forms of logic in the construction of discourses for the pulpit. By banishing those forms from his sermons, he may banish the things they express; and then strong, positive, argumentative preaching is no longer possible. This is one of the

things of which you must have the forms, or, in the long run, you can not have the things.

8th, Yet the best analytic methods of sermonizing will sometimes fail to define truth in the popular theology. The perils of the pulpit in this respect are nearly all on one side. A hundred sermons fall still-born from the pulpit because of their pointless structure, where one repels hearers by excess of angularity. That is sure to be a still-birth which produces a body without *vertebræ*. Life must have an osseous framework.

You will very soon begin to observe, in remarking the effects of sermons upon your audiences, that a structure which seems needlessly formal to you often is not so to them. Not only will you discover that subjects which you have tried to express by hint, by covert announcement, by silent inference from a text, are not detected by your hearers; but subjects which to you are as positive as a triangle in their statements, some of your hearers will misunderstand. They will suppose you to be preaching on the omnipotence of God, when, in fact, you are discoursing upon his sovereignty. They will be thinking of the degree of depravity while you are describing its extent. You will preach upon Christ's work of intercession, and some of your hearers will advance no nearer to your thought than to imagine that they have heard a sermon on prayer. You will be praised or censured for sermons which you never preached. You will be invited to repeat, and asked to publish, discourses of which you never heard. Some hearers will label a sermon with a theme derived from a single division of it, from a paragraph, from an illustration, from an application.

But is not this view contradictory to an opposite

view, which has been as positively expressed? I affirm the confusion of religious ideas among the people, yet I have claimed for the popular mind great keenness of intelligence. Is not this a contradiction? I answer, No. It is a brace of opposites. Any practical art, when reduced to its ultimate facts, must involve many such paradoxes. The popular mind is both intelligent and ignorant. The same individual mind may be both. The masses of men have sagacity without culture. Whatever intuition can teach them, they see with the eye of an eagle. But whatever depends on mental training, they need to be taught line upon line, precept upon precept. They will appreciate keen distinctions, if you once make those distinctions palpable. Gain attention to them, and assent is swift. But the multitude do not originate distinctions nicely. Therefore they need statements made for them, and so made as to command their understanding.

9th, Looking, now, for a few moments, away from the pulpit, we discover another illustration of the value of definite statements of themes, and of the style of thinking which such statements represent, in the importance attached to them in other departments of oratory. Out of the pulpit public speaking is commonly a business. It has an object in real life. Men are in earnest in it. Speakers speak for a purpose: hearers hear for a purpose. What, then, is the testimony of the senate and the bar on the question of the necessity of propositions? Why is a lawyer expected to state his case to a jury? Why must a senator speak to a motion, upon a resolution, for or against a bill? Why is legislative business printed and circulated before it passes to a second reading? These expedients of legislative and forensic usage are among the equivalents of those helps to

precision which a preacher seeks in choosing texts, and stating themes, and announcing divisions of sermons.

The ablest forensic orators have aimed to give to statements of truth the force of arguments for those truths. Said the chief justice of New Hampshire, in commenting upon one of Daniel Webster's early efforts, "That young man's statement of his case was an unanswerable argument for its justice." The judge borrowed the criticism from Edmund Burke, who had said the same of Lord Mansfield. The main force of Mansfield's eloquence lay in this, — his power to pack into the lucidness of a statement the weight of invincible logic. The consequence was that the House of Lords paid greater deference to his speeches than to those of any other man in England. From Mansfield, Chief Justice Marshall derived the same taste for elaborated and finished statements. Says one critic, "Marshall's force lay in three things: first, he understood his own purpose; secondly, he so stated it as to make a jury understand it; thirdly, he so stated it as to make them feel that neither they nor he had any concern with any thing else. For the time, the opposition was nowhere." This criticism suggests an admirable model for the statements of the themes of sermons.

Look over the ranks of eminent legal minds, and you will observe, that, almost without exception, those who command the position they hold, and hold the position they choose, are men of this type of intellectual force. Their productions when analyzed exhibit a polished compactness in the expression of vital truths which gives to mere statement literally the force of a syllogism. Their propositions are proofs. They prepossess conviction. We accept the statement, and say, "What is there here to argue about?"

A notable instance of this axiomatic style of statement, which carries its demonstration on the face of it, is found in the title of Dr. Bushnell's work on female suffrage, "The Reform against Nature." Nothing else could be so perfect, nothing else so unanswerable. The verbiage and the sophistry with which the press is deluged on that subject are rebuffed by that compression of the whole case into one idea in four words. We speak of truth in a nutshell: this is truth in a bombshell. Such a proposition is worth any volume which can be written on the subject. Half the work of constructing the book was finished in the invention of the title.

For the reasons which have now been given, the principle, I think, will be admitted, that a proposition, and a proposition studied, and a proposition stated, and often a proposition finished in elaborate and compact form, is a very vital part of pulpit discourse. Though but a fragment in form, it is an index to the whole style of thinking which underlies the form. Without it, the most valuable style of thinking is impracticable in the pulpit; and with it, all styles may be at command.