

LESSON XXI.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

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LECTURE XXI.

THE PROPOSITION: NECESSITY, SUBSTANCE.

II. THE views thus far presented suggest the further inquiry, in the second place, Does the necessity of a proposition in a sermon admit of exceptions?

1st, In answer let it be observed that some apparent exceptions are not real exceptions. Apparent exceptions occur in such cases as the following. One is where the theme of a sermon is naturally inferred from the occasion. A biographical discourse at a funeral may not require distinct announcement of its subject. Why? Because the audience already know what must be the center of thought in the sermon. The occasion is the proposition. There is an apparent exception where a subject of discourse has been announced by previous notice. An advertisement in a newspaper, or an announcement from the pulpit, may have anticipated the work of a proposition; so that to announce the theme may be unnaturally formal. Why? Only because such announcement would be a repetition where repetition is needless. A textual or an expository sermon may not need a distinct declaration that the text is the theme. Why? Because the explanation of the text may be so constructed that it shall be impossible for a hearer not to understand that the text is the center of interest. In a series of expository discourses,

formal statement of subject may be needless after the first discourse. Why? Because that first of the series has informed the audience, both of the subjects and of the method of discussion in the subsequent sermons.

These, you will perceive, are not real exceptions to the principle we have considered. But a class of discourses exist which are distinct from these, and which seem to involve the omission of a proposition. You say, and not unreasonably, "I do not wish always to disclose my object in a sermon till I reach its application to my hearers. How can I thus advance to my object under cover, if I must reveal every thing in a formal proposition? I must sometimes catch hearers with guile."

2d, This suggests the inquiry, Shall a proposition be omitted for the sake of politic concealment of the aim of a sermon? In answer let several facts be noted.

(1) In the first place, rhetorical concealment in the pulpit is itself exceptional. Preaching may, by the truthfulness of its character, venture upon an openness of policy which would not be wisdom of policy elsewhere. Diplomatic reserve of truth is the exception, not the rule, in the discourses of the pulpit. If it become the favorite art of a preacher, people distrust it, and are repelled. Dr. Emmons suffered in the estimation of some of his hearers by his fondness for concealed conclusions. The springing of a mine was his favorite symbol of the application of a sermon. His hearers used to say, "Beware of conceding the doctor's premises: nobody but he knows where he will lead you in the end." A Machiavellian reputation is not a desirable one in the pulpit. We want a docile, not a suspicious hearing. If, therefore, exception be made to the rule requiring a statement of proposition in a sermon

as an expedient of rhetorical policy, that exception should itself be rare.

(2) Concealment of an aim at the intellect of hearers is widely different from concealment of an appeal to their sensibilities. In the nature of the case, and therefore always, it is unphilosophical to announce an intention of appeal to the feelings. It is not in the nature of the case, and therefore it may never be as unphilosophical, to announce a design upon the convictions of men. Imagine a speaker, in the pulpit or out of it, saying to you, "Come now, I am about to excite your emotions: smile, weep, pity, fear, mourn, rejoice, with me." Imagine another saying, "Come, now, let us reason together. I wish to convince you: I propose to address your sober judgment: I ask you to hear my arguments: I hope to show you the truth of my conclusion." Is there no distinction between these two disclosures of rhetorical intent? Are we not repulsed by the one, when we should be attracted by the other? The one is a burlesque of oratory: the other may be its triumph.

The preacher may offend hearers by arrogance of manner in revealing the purpose to address their intellect. Said Luther, "I shall prove this doctrine so unanswerably, that any one of you who does not believe it will be damned." The repulsion here is caused by the dogmatic manner, not by the fact of disclosure. Intellect courts visible approach: sensibility evades such approach. Intellect is bold, and craves bold treatment. Sensibility is coy, and hides itself: it would be secretly won. This is human nature. We should never, therefore, carry over into the policy of treating the understanding the reserve which true policy requires in the treatment of the feelings. Each should

be managed according to its kind. A proposition for the intellect may be even the more necessary, because of a reserved aim at the sensibilities.

(3) Therefore the omission of all forms of proposition is not necessary, even when the application is concealed till the end. A proposition may involve your conclusion without stating it. Your proposition may announce a theme in the general: your conclusion may disclose a specific truth on that theme. Your proposition may be an interrogative: your conclusion may be its answer. Your proposition may ask attention to some thoughts suggested by the text: your conclusion may educe results which the hearers would not have tolerated at the outset.

Note a single illustration of one of these methods in which concealment is wisely practiced, yet in which a definite proposition is stated and held as a center of interest. The doctrine of eternal punishment is unpopular, we may suppose, among your hearers. You wish to preach it, yet would not arouse their prejudices needlessly. You therefore approach it gradually by a discussion which covers it from sight till your conclusion reveals it behind impregnable defenses. Must you withhold a proposition in order to do this? By no means. Adopt the text, "Are not my ways equal?" Announce as your proposition this, to consider some illustrations of the reasonableness of God's ways with men in certain things of which men often complain. This is a harmless statement, offensive to none, yet sufficiently definite to give to the intellect of hearers a center of attention and interest. You proceed to develop it by a cumulative series of remarks. You observe: 1. That God is reasonable in creating man without giving him a choice as to his own existence.

2. That God is reasonable in subjecting man to a government of law; 3. That God is reasonable in placing man on probation under law; 4. That God is reasonable in sustaining law by adequate sanction of which he only is the proper judge; 5. That God is reasonable in the reprieve of violators of law by a scheme of grace, of which, also, he alone can intelligently judge; 6. That God is reasonable in executing the sanctions of law against transgressors; 7. Especially is God reasonable in the punishment of sinners who have violated both law and grace.

In a cumulative discourse of this kind, your final object is reached by a gradual approach, which may be made to cover the whole of the popular objection to the doctrine of retribution. Yet a proposition is announced which conceals that final object till you are prepared to declare it advantageously. True, the proposition is not the most specific conceivable; but it is sufficiently so to answer the hearer's natural and irrepressible craving for a center of attention, and to be a protection against rambling thought. I repeat, therefore, it is not necessary to a politic concealment of the aim of a sermon that all form of proposition be withheld.

(4) To withhold all form of proposition is an impediment to the policy of concealment. To withhold a proposition implies an obvious concealment. The fact of concealment in discourse is a stroke of art. A disclosure of the fact that the drift of a discourse is concealed excites distrust. Our minds instinctively brace themselves against a hidden purpose on the part of a speaker, if the hint be given us that he has a hidden purpose. Therefore the perfection of art requires that the policy of concealment be itself concealed, and this demands that some form of proposition

be announced as a center of interest to the mind of the hearer.

III. The third general topic in the discussion of propositions is the inquiry, What principles should regulate the substance of a proposition? The substance of a proposition may be regarded in three relations, — the relation of its elements to each other, the relation of the whole to the text, and the relation of the whole to the sermon.

1st, The elements of a proposition should be so related to each other, that they shall be susceptible of unity of discussion. No art requires oneness of character in its productions more imperatively than that of oratorical discourse. A good discourse is a structure, — one structure, a whole, not a congeries of alien particles.

(1) A sermon, therefore, comes under all the laws of unity which regulate discourse in other forms. As we have seen that nothing is a sermon which is not a structure, so every part of it, if perfectly formed, must be constructed. Every part gravitates to every other part. The demand for this grows out of the very nature of persuasive speech, and is inevitable in every mind. The demand is one which reason always makes upon reason. If not, why should incoherent speech be a sign of delirium?

(2) The foundation of unity of discourse must be laid in unity of proposition. The parts can not gravitate towards each other without resultant forces which meet in a center. The most vigorous elements in a sermon, if they have not the centripetal attraction, can only jostle and defeat each other. Thoughts let loose in speech, and left there, neutralize each other. The more powerful they are individually, the weaker they

are as a whole. The more intense the emotions in which they are draped, the more frigid is their effect upon intelligent purpose. Of such purpose they have none. They can move a hearer only to a state of bewilderment.

Hence it is, that, in the history of the pulpit, those discourses which commonly produce epileptic and cataleptic phenomena in the audience are rambling discourses. Thought without an aim, emotion without a purpose, stimulation of the sensibilities without intelligent gravitation to an object let loose upon feeble minds the most unmanageable tendencies to pathological distortion. A center of thought rigidly adhered to, even in the wildest of ranting discourse, would tend to preserve the mental balance of hearers by the mere conservatism of intellect in its control of feeling. Animal sensibilities can scarcely master a mind which is thinking intensely and consecutively to one point. Such a singleness of point in discourse is gained by a proposition. The first constructive idea we can form of a discourse must be an idea of its proposition, and that, as Vinet remarks, we always assume to have been one, and but one. We never ask what were the subjects. We assume unity, never plurality, unless we mean to burlesque a rambling speaker. The reason is that nature prompts us to seek the germ of a discourse in its proposition. Fénelon only expresses the same truth in another form, when he says, "The discourse is the proposition unfolded, and the proposition is the discourse condensed."

Another phenomenon which deserves notice is that, if the discourse has no unity of theme, a good hearer instinctively struggles to create it and insert it as the discourse proceeds. Something he must have to put

under the superstructure, and support its weight by some sort of logical form. We observe, therefore, one of the axioms of homiletics in the fact before us, — that the elements of a proposition must be so related to each other as to be susceptible of unity of discussion. A sermon may be devoid of unity, if a proposition is not; but it surely will be devoid of unity, if the proposition is.

(3) The inquiry arises here, Does not this requisition of unity of proposition restrict freedom of discourse? Not at all; for unity of proposition admits of every variety of discourse which has an object. It restrains only discourse at random. In illustration of this we must observe that unity itself admits of great diversity of kind. Vinet specifies twelve varieties of unity, giving rise to as many kinds of consecutive and intelligent discourse. The whole subject of unity is simplified by recalling the four radical varieties of composition by which we have classified sermons. Explanation, proof, illustration, persuasion, — this enumeration is exhaustive. A preacher who speaks with an object must do one or more of these four things, and only these. Observe, then, how the subject of unity in preaching clarifies itself by adjustment to these radical diversities of composition. From the nature of the case, there must be four fundamental varieties of unity in discourse, and therefore in propositions; and there can be no more. Let us note these varieties.

First, a proposition may admit of a logical unity of discourse. It may suggest a process of argument; and the discourse, if true to its object, will be an argumentative production. Its aim will be to prove one thing. But this logical unity is susceptible of very great diversity. One variety is that in which the object of

discourse is to consider the objections to a doctrine. Another variety is that in which a truth is proved, and inferences from it are considered. Again: unity of logical aim may be consistent with a consideration of truths mutually related. Still further: logical unity admits of a combination of truth with other processes as subordinates. Explanation may be a preliminary to the proof of a doctrine. The complications are innumerable in which a logical unity inheres in great diversity; yet in the proposition itself we detect perfect unity of aim.

Secondly, a proposition may be adjusted to a didactic unity of discourse. The aim of a discourse being explanation, not proof, that aim may be single; and, if the sermon obeys it, a perfect oneness will result in the whole structure. This didactic unity also may be unimpaired by variety in the elements of the proposition. Jeremy Taylor discourses upon "growth in grace, with its proper instruments and signs." Here one thing is treated in certain relations, and these relations introduce variety. Unity of aim is not impaired by plurality of elements. Again: the didactic, like the logical unity admits of the combination of topics mutually related. Bourdaloue preached upon "the severity and mildness of Christian law." This is a dual proposition, but dual only in form. Each of the two elements is the complement of the other, and therein consists the unity of theme. The didactic even exceeds the logical unity in the freedom it gives to the range of discourse. It admits of a union, in one proposition, of contrasted truths. Massillon treats in one sermon "the death of the sinner and the death of the righteous." Jeremy Taylor yokes into one proposition "lukewarmness and zeal." Antithetical propositions may be the most compact units. Antithesis is often intense in the singleness of its im-

pression. Lightning is never at other times so vivid as at midnight. Didactic unity without losing itself may subside into a textual unity. The singleness of a sermon must often consist in the preacher's fidelity to one text. For the inspired thought, either in its elements or its order, he is not responsible. A discourse is one if it develops fully the force of one text, and no more. Therefore a proposition is one, if it invites attention to the teachings of one text.

Thirdly, a proposition may be fitted to a picturesque unity of discourse. Did you never listen to a sermon of which the details would appear to a superficial criticism to be chaotic in their confusion, but which still left upon your mind a burning impression of one thing? Did it explain any thing? No. Did it prove any thing? No. But did it not intensify something? Was not the last charge you could bring against it that of talk at random? The sermon was illustrative. But what kind of unity had it, or could it have? Precisely the unity of a good painting. As in a painting variety of personage may exist, and lights and shadows, diversities of form and feature and drapery and attitude, even contrasts of coloring and expression and character, yet all may be grouped so as to be vividly one in design and in effect, so an illustrative sermon may admit of infinitely varied details with no loss of a genuine unity. It is not the unity of a dialectic or a didactic aim; but for immediate impression, especially upon the popular mind, it may be more intense than either. The effect may be like vision. The unpretending proposition may be to the hearing of the sermon what the optic nerve is to the brain.

Examples of this kind of unity are found in Jeremy Taylor's discourse on the "Apples of Sodom," and again

on "Doomsday-book," and in Professor Park's discourse on "the character of Judas," and again on "the character of Peter." Such sermons are pictures. We must look for the point of unity in them, as we look for the interpretation of a painting. Our eye must be adjusted to the right focus. We must judge as of perspective. Very many sermons which a mincing critic would condemn find the key to their structure in the single fact that they are rhetorical paintings. Their unity is æsthetic. It may be rather suggested than defined by very simple forms of proposition.

This picturesque unity of discourse, like the other forms of unity which have been named, is susceptible of variety in unity. Even the proposition of such a discourse may suggest such variety. Rev. Albert Barnes once preached on the "Life and Times of Isaiah." The unity of the structure was not impaired by representing the prophet thus as the central figure to be illustrated by his surroundings. Even contrast may be contained and expressed in such a proposition without loss to its unity. A discourse was once delivered on "a comparison of St. John in the Isle of Patmos, and Napoleon at St. Helena." The sermon was a series of contrasts between the two exiles, of which the proposition gave an unmistakable hint. True, the statement of the theme of a picturesque discourse does not admit of as great variety in unity as that of a didactic or an argumentative sermon; but the difference is in statement only, not in the substance of the theme. All picturesque art is made up of hints of truth. More is meant than words define. It is not unbecoming, therefore, if the proposition of a picturesque discourse partakes of the same fragmentary character.

Fourthly, a proposition may be adjusted to a purely

oratorical unity of discourse. "The practice of religion enforced by reason" is the theme of one of Dr. South's sermons. What is the point of unity in this? Argument, explanation, illustration are found in the sermon, but as subordinate elements only. They do not express the aim of the sermon. Yet that is expressed in the proposition. The object is direct persuasion to a religious life. This is a purely oratorical aim. This kind of unity characterizes a very large class of discourses in the practice of the pulpit.

These four radical varieties of unity — the logical, the didactic, the picturesque, and the oratorical — are exhaustive of the analysis of unity in discourse. From the nature of rhetorical composition, it follows that these are the fundamental varieties, and that there can be no more. The entire question of unity of discourse, which often seems blindfold in rhetorical discussion, may be, in any case, determined by bringing the discourse to the test of the inquiry, Can its materials be all brought under the cover of a proposition, which, in any of these senses of the term, is one? On the other hand, the unity of a proposition may, in any case, be tested by the inquiry, Does it admit of a discussion which shall be, in any of these senses, one? All the freedom of range in discussion which is possible in speaking to a purpose may be illustrated in sermons constructed upon these models of oneness in proposition.

But it is often said, and truly, that all the materials of a sermon can not always be brought within the range of a unique proposition. A certain class of evangelists are never weary of decrying the scholastic training for the pulpit, because they claim that it binds the preacher by rules of unity which hamper freedom. "I want to let my tongue loose in preaching," says one of this class

of divines, "and say what comes to me: I must utter whatever the Holy Ghost shall put into my mouth."

(4) This leads us to observe that the great excellence of the scholastic requisition of unity in a proposition is that it does restrain heterogeneous discourse. That which "comes to me" should not be uttered, if it is nothing to the purpose. The Holy Spirit is the author of order, not of confusion. He no more prompts to disorderly, inconsecutive discourse, than he prompts to raving. If a preacher's materials can not be built into one kind of structure, for one purpose, they ought not to be thrust together at one delivery. Piling such materials in layers, and capping them with a text, and adding the appendage of an exhortation, does not make a sermon of them.

A preacher at court in the time of the Stuarts once proposed to consider as the theme of his sermon three things: "First, the justice of God; secondly, the mercy of God; thirdly, that the actions of princes are not to be inquired into." Here is juxtaposition of materials, but no possible unity. What one proposition could cover them? what one text? what one aim of applicatory discourse? It is an admirable test of the materials gathered for a projected sermon, to inquire, Can they all be compressed under the shelter of a proposition which shall have unity of substance? If not, they will make but a rambling or disjointed sermon. Like will produce its like. The unity of a sermon is to be provided for chiefly in the proposition. "Do not disturb the unity of military thought in Italy. One bad general is better than two good ones;" — so wrote Napoleon to the French Directory. The art of discourse requires that which is equivalent to unity of command in a campaign; that is, oneness of proposition.

2d, Having thus regarded the elements of a proposition in their relations to each other, it would be in place now to consider them in their relation, as a whole, to the text, observing as a second principle respecting the substance of the proposition, that it should be congruous with the text. It is an excellence peculiar to the themes of the pulpit, that they can be formed in keeping with inspired authorities. Proposition and text should sustain each other. If the proposition is the trunk from which the body of the sermon expands itself, the text is the root from which, in some sense, the proposition should grow. To avoid repetition, I refer you here to the discussion which we have already presented of the pertinency of the text. In the treatment of that theme the topic of congruity between text and proposition was sufficiently considered.