

LESSON XXIII.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

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LECTURE XXIII.

THE PROPOSITION: SUBSTANCE, FORMS.

LET the suggestions of the last lecture concerning the relation of a proposition to the sermon be now applied by observing certain indecisive reasons for retrenchment. We often meet with inducements to frame a restricted proposition, which may, but which may not, be good reasons for such a policy. All that can be said of them, in general, is that they are not conclusive.

One of these indecisive reasons is fruitfulness of theme. We may be beguiled into the policy of restriction by the excitement of composition. Under that excitement a subject opens luxuriantly. In the midst of the discussion we may seem to be more distant from the end than at the beginning. A traveler never seems to himself so far away from everywhere as when he is in mid-ocean in a gale. Fruitfulness of theme may be good reason for retrenchment; but it may not. Do not trust implicitly to the glow of composition. Your original survey of the subject in a calmer mood may be the more trustworthy.

For the same reason, convenience in composition is no conclusive defense of a restricted theme. This will often tempt you. You will state a subject in its fullness; but you will often find that composing is unexpectedly easy in the first half of the discourse. You

come upon a ledge of soft stone in the quarry; you prefer to work it for the ease of the working. Hence you fall back, and retrench your proposition. In the majority of such cases the restrictive policy for such a reason is unwise. The original bulk of subject, treated by a wise selection from the superabundant materials, and packed well into one sermon, would do more execution at the time, and would live longer in the memory of hearers, than if it were bisected, and expanded into the double sermon which has been so common in the history of the American pulpit. The soft ledge in the quarry is probably not the most desirable material with which to build. Select materials from a full mine are the ideal matter for a sermon.

Another inconclusive argument for retrenching a proposition is the desire to exhaust the subject proposed. The idea of exhausting a subject as distinct from a proposition we must often abandon. Some subjects we can not exhaust. The best subjects we can not exhaust. Yet these are subjects which may require a large area of proposition to give even an impressive fragment of them. But some minds are so constructed, that they can not traverse a large area of material without losing all sense of its limitations, and therefore they ramble on indefinitely. Have you not found preachers and authors who never seem to know when to let go of a subject? They cling to it with a tenacity which is exhaustive to themselves, and afflictive to their hearers and readers. Such a mind was that of Dr. Owen. Such was that of Dr. Charnock. The English pulpit of their day was distinguished by nothing more generally than by pertinacity of discussion. The sermon which Baxter preached before King Charles II. could not have been recited in less than two hours.

Charnock's sermon on "the duty and reward of bounty to the poor" required three hours and a half. We must not feel obliged to hunt down a subject into all its possible lurking-places. In preaching, as in common life, it is the fool who is able to utter all his mind. Yet we must not, in order to escape this extreme, dwarf a proposition. Give to it its natural dimensions, and then expand the sermon to those, and with that be content.

(3) We have observed of the substance of the proposition, that it should not contain more material than can be well discussed in one sermon, and that it should not contain less material than is sufficient for impressive discussion in one sermon. These principles suggest a third, — that the proposition should not contain other material than that which is discussed in the sermon. An obvious yet not uncommon defect in sermons is that their propositions do not express the real topics of discourse. The proposition may promise one thing: the sermon may realize another. Three forms of this defect deserve notice. One is that in which the proposition does not even contain the subject of discourse. Want of accuracy in analysis of a subject, or heedlessness in its definition, may lead a preacher to announce as his theme that which he has no intention to discuss. This occurs more frequently than one would suppose it to be possible to an educated mind. You propose, for example, to treat of the privilege of fellowship with Christ; but in fact you treat of the duty of fellowship with Christ. What is the difference? It is the difference between an appeal to conscience and an appeal to the sense of liberty. This represents a considerable class of sermons, in which we make an unconscious transition from the higher plane of liberty

to the lower plane of law. Have you not been sensible of this in listening to sermons? A subject as stated has promised a cheering side of truth; as developed, it has insensibly veered around to the sterner side. Beginning with "may," it has ended with "must."

Another form of the defect before us is that in which the method of discussion promised in the proposition is not that realized in the development. One preacher proposes to consider the nature of repentance, but the thing he discusses is the duty of repenting. What is the fault? Not only is there here an unwarranted change of subject, but a necessary change of rhetorical character in the discussion. In discussing the nature of a thing, you must explain: in discussing the duty of the thing, you must either prove or persuade. These are very different rhetorical processes,—different to the extent of producing a radical difference of discourse. The difficulty originates in a want of a thorough digestion of the materials before the proposition is framed. The remedy lies in the construction of a well-framed plan of discourse at the outset. Keep always in mind that a proposition is a promise: it demands foresight of your means of payment.

A third variety of the defect under consideration is that in which the proposition suggests a different point of unity from that which the discourse develops. What is the point of unity in a discourse? It is that point to which all the impressions of the discourse converge. It corresponds to the hero of a drama or of an epic poem. It is to a sermon what Hamlet and Othello are to the tragedies which bear their names. Must a sermon have a point of unity? Yes, if well constructed. It lies in the nature of persuasive discourse. Such discourse is a structure; it must have an aim; that aim

must gather into itself all the forces of impression which the discourse creates. Must, then, the unity of a proposition and the unity of a discussion coincide? Certainly: there can be no perfect discourse without this coincidence. A proposition is but a figure-head to a sermon, if it does not suggest the true center of interest in the sermon.

Observe an illustration of this defect in secular literature. Shakespeare's "Julius Cæsar" has been censured by critics for its title, because Cæsar is not the central character of the drama. Brutus is its center of interest. Brutus gives unity to the plot. Around Brutus every other character and every event revolve. The intensity of the drama deepens with the development of the destiny of Brutus; and, when Brutus dies, nothing remains to sustain tragic impression. On this theory the title of the play should have been "Marcus Brutus." Dryden was so much impressed by the justice of this criticism, that he once edited the drama with an amended title: "Julius Cæsar, with the death of Brutus." This shows at least the need of identity between the center of interest in a work of art and the center expressed or hinted at in its title. The title should not look one way, and the work another. The same principle should regulate a proposition and its discussion in a persuasive discourse. The point of unity which the proposition suggests should be identical with that which the discourse develops.

The violation of this principle is often illustrated in sermons on the governmental theory of the Atonement. Discourses explaining and defending that theory are often framed upon some such propositions as these: "The Grounds of the Atonement of Christ;" "The Reasons for the Necessity of an Atonement;"

"Why is an Atonement necessary for the Pardon of Sin?" These forms of proposition, you will observe, are sweeping. They profess to cover the whole ground of the philosophy of the Atonement. Upon them, or their equivalents, hundreds of sermons have been preached, advancing the moral necessities of the universe under a government of law, as explanatory of the necessity and the fact of Christ's work in atoning for sin. What, now, is the defect in such propositions for such discourses? It is, as before, that proposition and sermon suggest different points of unity. Who knows that the governmental theory of the Atonement comprises all the grounds of it in the mind of God? Who can prove that it expresses, therefore, all the reasons for the necessity of the Atonement? Who can venture to affirm that it answers in full the question, "Why?" Who knows in full the reasons for the Atonement? Anybody can ask, but who can answer, the question "Why?" We know but in part: we see through a glass darkly. When we have traced the Atonement to the moral government of the universe, and that to the mind of God, we have followed the rivulet to the Amazon, and the Amazon to the sea, and we can go no further. We discern the coloring or the eddies of the stream a little distance from the shore, but beyond that we lose it in an infinite unknown. This example illustrates the importance of the defect we are considering, in its bearing upon some of the most critical discussions of the pulpit.

In judiciary decisions it is a standing principle never to anticipate a case, never to expand a principle beyond the necessities of the case in hand. Such should be the policy of the pulpit in the construction of propositions. Specify: specify: so far as the aim of the dis-

course admits, always specify. Propose no other than the thing to be realized. Volunteer nothing in the proposition which the sermon will not redeem. Meet in the proposition the exact demand of the discussion: no more, no less, no other.

IV. The fourth general topic in the discussion of propositions is that of their forms. In the treatment of this subject I must trust to your patience. The form of any thing in literature is a dry theme. Yet in practice you will find the form of the proposition to be a striking feature in the face of a sermon. It is not less significant in discourse than the nose is in the human countenance. Both are expressive of character. The principles of perfect form apply to propositions and divisions, to a great extent, alike. Therefore, although at present I shall speak mainly of propositions, in order to avoid repetition I shall sometimes illustrate by application of a principle to divisions.

1st, Let us, first, observe certain fundamental distinctions of form in the statement of propositions.

(1) Your collegiate studies have made you familiar with the distinction between logical and rhetorical propositions. A logical proposition affirms or denies. A rhetorical proposition states a subject for affirmation or denial. This, it should be remarked, is a distinction in form only. Any subject of discussion can be stated in either form. Still it is not, on this account, a matter of indifference which form of statement is selected. The foundation of the Hollis Professorship in Harvard College requires the incumbent to preach to the collegians on the divinity of Christ. The report was once current that the last occupant of the chair preached against the divinity of Christ. If he did so, the design of the founder was frustrated by so small a matter

as the difference between a rhetorical and a logical proposition.

(2) Logical propositions are distinguished as affirmative or negative in form. This, also, is a distinction in form only. You can state the same truth either by affirming it, or by denying its opposites. You may deny an error by affirming the opposite truth. Any logical truth can be clothed in either form. Yet often we may discern very positive rhetorical reasons for preferring one form to the other.

(3) Rhetorical propositions are distinguishable as declarative or interrogative in form. Dr. Barrow has a sermon on "the unsearchableness of God's judgments." Dr. Emmons proposes, as a theme of discourse, "to inquire whether the eternal foreknowledge of God is true, and how can it be true." It is not difficult to see that very significant reasons may exist for a choice between these two forms of statement.

(4) All the forms of proposition thus far defined may be further distinguished as simple, or complex, or plural forms of proposition. Dr. Bushnell has a sermon, the proposition of which is, "obligation to God is a privilege;" and another, the proposition of which is, "we require to be unsettled in life by many changes and interruptions of adversity in order to be most effectually loosened from our own evils, and prepared to the will and work of God;" and a third, the proposition of which is: "1. That we live under a cloud, and see God's way only by a dim light; 2. That God shines at all times above the cloud; 3. That this cloud of obscuration is finally to be cleared away." These are specimens of the simple and the complex and the plural propositions. A simple proposition mentions a subject only, with no appendage of relations. A com-

plex proposition pursues a subject into its relations and yet retains singleness of form. A plural proposition specifies a group of topics which have unity of subject, but not unity of form. These are diversities in form only. In substance they may be interchanged.

(5) As the interchangeableness of propositions is a vital point, let me ask you to observe an illustration of it. For the sake of simplicity let us select the most trite of the themes of the pulpit, — that of repentance. Observe how the substance of one sermon can be put through all the forms of statement which have been defined. (a) You first announce as your theme the subject "Repentance." This is a rhetorical declarative proposition, the most general conceivable. Under it you can discuss any thing pertaining to repentance. (b) You inquire, Is it the duty of all men to repent? You thus obtain a rhetorical interrogative proposition. Yet you may array under it the very same materials as before. (c) You propose to show that it is the duty of all men to repent. With the same ideal as before, so far as the materials are concerned, you have now a logical affirmative proposition. (d) You declare as your theme, "No man can be exempted from the obligation to repent." You thus, with no necessary change of materials, exchange the affirmative for a negative logical proposition. (e) But we may suppose that the design of your discourse involves some consideration of the necessity of the Holy Spirit to induce repentance. You ask attention to repentance considered as the duty of man and the gift of God; or you propose the inquiry, Is repentance both a duty and a gift? or you affirm the fact, all men are under obligation to repent, notwithstanding their dependence on the Holy Spirit; or you deny the fact

that any man is exempt from obligation to repent, by the necessity of the influence of the Holy Ghost. By our hypothesis, there is no essential change in your ideal of what the sermon is to be; but, by variations in form of statement, you construct four varieties of complex proposition. One is declarative; one is interrogative; one is affirmative; one is negative; and all are complex in form. (*f*) But suppose, further, that the character of your audience seems to you to require the extreme of clearness in specification of theme. You therefore adopt none of the preceding forms of proposition. But you say, after the model which Dr. Emmons so often adopts, "I design in this discourse to establish three things: 1. That every man is under obligation to repent; 2. That every man is dependent on the Holy Spirit for repentance; 3. That obligation and dependence in the act of repenting are mutually consistent." Or you propose to prove negatively three things: "1. That no man can free himself from the duty of repentance; 2. That no man will repent while unregenerated by the Holy Ghost; 3. That duty and dependence in the matter of repenting are not contradictory." Or you propose to answer three inquiries: "1. Is the obligation to repent universal? 2. Is divine interposition indispensable to secure repentance? 3. Are dependence and obligation in repentance consonant with each other?" Or you suggest as the theme of remark three topics: "1. Man's responsibility for his own repentance; 2. Man's dependence on God for repentance; 3. The relation of repentance as a duty to repentance as a gift." By the supposition, your ideal of the discourse is still substantially unchanged. But, from variations in the form of statement, you obtain four additional varieties of

proposition. One is affirmative; one is negative; one is interrogative; one is declarative; and all are plural in form. Can you not conceive of precisely the same substance of discourse as coming under every one of these twelve varieties of form in proposition? Yet is it not plain that it would by no means be a matter of indifference which form should head the discussion?

(6) Yet it is necessary to remark, further, that a choice from among these fundamental varieties of proposition will not necessarily insure a perfect statement of a theme. In a good proposition every word is vital to the structure. The locality of every word is of moment to the whole. The relations of each word to every other, the collocation of words into clauses, the number of words, and the syntax of the whole are essential subjects of criticism in the construction. A proposition is the embodiment of emphasis: it is all emphatic. *Minutiæ* of style, therefore, must often be considered in its making, which criticism can not determine by rules laid down in advance. We must have the case in hand in order to frame the decision of taste. A preacher needs, therefore, that state of mental culture, and that degree of practice in stating themes of sermons, which shall enable him to frame his propositions with unconscious skill, as a good writer constructs all other composition. All that criticism can do in anticipation of the work is to observe, as we have now done, the fundamental varieties of form in propositions, and then to add certain general principles for the regulation of good taste in the choice from among them.