

LESSON XXIV.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

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LECTURE XXIV.

THE PROPOSITION: SIMPLICITY.

2D, Having considered the fundamental distinctions of form in proposition, let us, in the second place, observe certain principles which should regulate their forms.

(1) The form of a proposition should be characterized by as great a degree of simplicity as is consistent with a full statement. The prime virtue in a perfect statement of any thing is its simplicity. In such a process we require nothing extraordinary, no ambitious strain of style, no imaginative garnish, no affectation of an excellence. The verdict of centuries upon the quality before us is packed into the formula of the oath administered by civilized courts to witnesses. Just such, also, is the character of a perfect proposition. We give a faultless description of it in saying it is a statement, a full statement, and nothing but a statement, of the thing in hand.

Notice, in the first place, that, in framing such a proposition, we must especially avoid words of unintelligible or doubtful meaning to the hearers. Among other words of this class may be specified the technical vocabulary of natural science. A college professor, in a discourse on "certain mineralogical illustrations of character," sacrificed classic English to the nomencla

ture of science in the structure of nearly all the statements of the divisions. They are these: 1. The transparent character; 2. The hydrophanous character; 3. The semitransparent character; 4. The translucent character; 5. The doubly-refracting character; 6. The phosphorescent character; 7. The dichroic character; 8. The chatoyant character; 9. The irised or pavonine character; 10. The opaque character. Scarcely one of these forms of statement, except the first, is intelligible outside of a mineralogical cabinet. A preacher should not be ashamed to confess the weakness of wishing to be understood. The best apology for the sermon in question — and the apology had some force — was that it was preached in a college chapel, to hearers who were daily frequenting the cabinet of minerals, and, therefore, by the majority of them, it was understood. It may be, that, before such an audience, its scientific labels gave piquancy to the train of thought. Still the dialect of preaching should be the dialect of literature as distinct from science. The taste of scholarship, not that of the laboratory or the museum, should control its diction. Such a taste will prescribe a simplicity which will eject from propositions and divisions every thing but the purest and simplest English.

On the same principle, we should also avoid in the structure of propositions an abstruse philosophical vocabulary. One offers as a proposition “the subjective ground of justification.” The truth which he discusses is “faith considered as a condition of salvation.” Why not call it so, and be understood? Another proposes to discourse upon the “ethical laws of Christianity.” The subject turns out to be “the excellence of Christ’s morality over that of other religions.” Why not say this, and speak to the good sense of nine-tenths of the hearers?

A third indicates as his subject, "the norm of sanctification." This is getting into deeper water. The discussion resolves itself into an illustration of this principle, that "grace grows by exercise." Why not have the courage to accept this? It is a gem of a subject. What is added to it by starching the proposition to the primness and pedantry of a philosophical diction in which nobody recognizes the beautiful and friendly truth? If we must have the general rather than the more specific proposition, why talk of the "norm" of a thing, when we have such stanch old words as "law," and "rule," and "principle"? Even the derivatives "normal" and "abnormal" are barely tolerable in a popular dialect; but the root "norm" is an affectation of philosophical pedantry which old Roger Ascham would have flung from him as an "inkhorn term" which scholasticism had "caught by the tail."

Again: the principle before us should exclude from propositions many of the technical terms of theology. A large proportion of theological technicalities will almost necessarily be unintelligible to some hearers, and of doubtful meaning to others. From time immemorial they have burdened the dialect of the pulpit. Especially in the statement of subjects, the dialect needed in the pulpit is not that of the university, but the cultured dialect of common life and common men. Some masters of language can do in speech what masters of painting do in colors,—make varieties illustrate each other. Rufus Choate could make the technicalities of law and of literature deepen and adorn the thoughts, which, for the most part, he expressed in language level to the minds of a miscellaneous jury. So there are princes of expression in the pulpit, who can make the technicalities of theology enrich the

materials of their sermons, and at the same time make the popular elements of their style illuminate and interpret those technicalities. The effect is that the hearer is sensible of a range of thought and style above his own use, yet not above his own comprehension. To the extent of a preacher's power to produce this illuminated compound of opposites in style, he may safely employ the dialect of theological schools. But, beyond the limit of that power, no man can hope to be understood in the use of that dialect, except by the rare audiences who have been trained by a quarter of a century of technically dogmatic preaching. The number of such audiences in our day may be reckoned on one's fingers.

Aside from such exceptions, the best general test by which to admit or to exclude the technical style of theology in framing the propositions of sermons is that of the degree of its assimilation to the language of the Scriptures. The sacred books of a reading nation become, almost of necessity, a literary standard to that nation. Thus the Scriptures have become throughout Christendom, so far as the people are permitted and taught to read them, a standard of literary intelligence. The vocabulary of the Scriptures forms the greater part of the vocabulary of such a people in all their expression of dignified thought. In biblical connections and for biblical uses the people understand words which they never use, and might never understand, in different connections. As a consequence, the religious vocabulary of a people, as in Great Britain and Germany and America, is by several degrees more elevated than their secular vocabulary.

At the same time, it is true that the Scriptures have given to theological science some of its most salient

phraseology. The scholastic theologian often finds, that, even for scientific use, he can not improve upon the style of the Bible. A preacher, therefore, will commonly be on safe ground, as it respects the intelligibility of his style to the people, if he employs in the construction of his propositions and divisions only those technicalities of theology which the Bible has originated, and omits those which are the pure product of the schools. On this principle, therefore, we do not scruple to employ such technicalities of theology as "redemption," "justification," "predestination," "foreknowledge," and similar terms which a Christianized people can not but understand.

But how stands the case with certain other technicalities of theology? Is it wise to propose as the theme of a sermon "the free moral agency of man"? I think not. Why? Because it is scholastic in its origin and in its associations; and its scholasticism is not relieved by any thing that the Bible has to say on the subject. What, then, can we substitute for it? Such a statement as this, — "man's responsibility for his own character." It is worthy of note, on all topics involving the question of freewill, that the Scriptures never directly discuss that question. They teach responsibility, and stop there. The rest is left to human consciousness. Ability, freedom, fate, necessity, — the whole group of topics with which philosophy in all ages has dealt so freely, — are not treated in the Bible. We may wisely follow its example in the selection and statement of the themes of sermons. We gain thus the advantage which the Bible gains by its policy, — the support of every man's consciousness. Responsibility every man feels conscious of: ability in certain connections no man feels conscious of. It matters little whether men

believe in their moral freedom or not: their consciousness of responsibility remains intact on either hypothesis. That is, men are conscious, not of ability directly, but of that which implies ability. The policy of the inspired preachers is to throw the whole brunt of the question of ability upon the consciousness of responsibility. Back of that they never go. Therefore I would never discuss directly the subject of moral freedom in the pulpit.

Is it desirable to propose as a subject "the doctrine of original sin," or "the imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity"? I think not. This phraseology is the product of the school alone. Common usage has never adopted it: men never confess conviction of sin by the use of it. The Scriptures do not contain it, nor do they give any such prominence to the truth which the schoolmen convey by it as to have exalted and illuminated it in the intelligence of the people. What, then, can we substitute for it? Such a form of proposition as this, "the connection of the sinfulness of the race with the fall of Adam," or the inquiry, "How has the fall in Eden affected the character of mankind?" The subject as thus expressed is a biblical theme. It can be discussed, if need be, without reference to the historic controversies on the subject.

The same principle should be applied to the phrase "total depravity" and to that of "the trinity of persons in the Godhead." Why is it, that if you adopt as the proposition of a sermon a statement containing the phrase "total depravity," or that of "three persons in the Godhead," you must exhaust one-half of your sermon to explain what the doctrine is not? This has become the stereotyped method of the pulpit of New England ▲ discoursing on these doctrines, if

they are presented under the shelter of these technical statements. What, then, can we substitute for these scholastic statements of the doctrines? Such forms of proposition as these, that "man is by nature destitute of holiness;" or, "that the moral nature of man is sinful and only sinful;" or, "What is the natural character of man?" that "God exists as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost;" or, "that the Scriptures teach a threefold distinction in the being of God;" or, "What is the scriptural doctrine of the mode of divine existence?"

At this point should be noticed a peril to which preachers may expose themselves through inattention to the growth of certain forms of statement in their own minds. Statements may be obscure to hearers, which meditation has rendered elementary to preachers. Studious preachers are studious of truth in its philosophical relations. Themes of sermons, therefore, will often suggest themselves in a philosophical dialect. In that form their obscurity to hearers may escape the preacher's detection. Abstractions, to a mind which feeds upon them, become like concrete realities. But, for the purposes of discourse to an audience, there is great power and great beauty in calling things by their simple names. Call water, water, and fire, fire, remembering always that the first object of language is to be understood.

In the second place, the simplicity of propositions may be promoted by avoiding figurative forms of statement. We have before observed, that a proposition is a statement, and nothing more. If so, it is not an explanation, it is not an appeal, it is not an illustration, it is not primarily an argument: therefore the defect in a figurative proposition is that it is not the simplest form of statement. A figure may give clearness to an

explanation force to an argument, vividness to an illustration, eloquence to an appeal, but not simplicity to a statement. It may therefore be more pertinent anywhere else in a sermon than in the statement of a proposition or division. Why is a metaphorical description of a crime not allowable in the enactment of criminal law? Why is a metaphorical boundary of real estate not pertinent in a title-deed? For a similar reason, figure is not becoming in a proposition. Literalness is essential to simplicity in any thing which professes to be a statement, and nothing more.

It has been sometimes advised that a proposition should be so framed as to be a good title to a sermon if it were printed. This is by no means a safe criterion. A good proposition, it is true, may be a good title; but a good title may not be a simple proposition. A title may be only a hint of the contents of a discourse: therefore it may be imaginative. The Rev. Nehemiah Adams, D.D., of Boston, delivered a sermon on the introduction of the Cochituate water into the city, and printed it under the beautifully significant title: "A Song of the Well." What would that title have been worth as a proposition? A metaphorical hint of a theme is not a simple statement of it.

Figurative propositions are sometimes vindicated on the ground of their biblical origin. Simeon, on the text, "I am the vine, ye are the branches," advances the proposition, "God's treatment of us as branches of the true vine;" and from the text, "He that eateth and drinketh unworthily eateth and drinketh damnation to himself," he derives the proposition, "eating and drinking our damnation." These examples will recall to you a multitude of sermons in which the statements of the subjects embody biblical figures; such as "Baal,"

"Mammon," "the flesh," "the old man," and other scriptural modes of representing sin or its objects; and such as "Zion," "Israel," "Jerusalem," "The walls of Zion," and other scriptural modes of indicating the Church. Such figurative statements are not obsolescent in the modern pulpit. A discourse was preached within a few years on the subject of Samson's riddle, the divisions of which were: (1) There are lions in every man's path; 2. The slaying of these lions yields the sweetest rewards of life.

Is the argument for such propositions and divisions, that they are often founded upon figurative texts, an adequate defense of them? Surely not, if they are not intrinsically the best fitted to the purpose of a simple statement of the subjects of discourse. Why employ biblical poetry for a literal purpose, rather than any other poetry? The extreme of ill taste to which the usage exposes a preacher is illustrated in the following instance. A preacher in Massachusetts, a few years ago, wished to present the growth in a Christian character in its several phases from conversion to a mature Christian experience. He defined three phases, which he stated in his three divisions thus: 1. At the beginning of the Christian life we are all babes in Christ; 2. As we advance in experience we become young men, of whom the Apostle says "Ye are strong;" 3. In the final stages of our growth we all become mothers in Israel. What defect has this example which many others by more tasteful preachers have not in less degree?

Figurative propositions and divisions are often defended on the ground that the usage of the pulpit has indulged in them from time immemorial. They have, in the minds of some, the prestige of a venerable an-

tiquity. It is not always easy to reply to this saintly predilection for the antiquities of the pulpit. We should judge of it as men of sense rather than men of feeling. Remember that preaching is a business. Its object is an immediate object, a pressing object: it is the business of an emergency. Like any other such business, it can not be more fatally embarrassed than by wrapping it in the folds of romantic feeling.

Witness the unreal, often the dreamy, descriptions of Christian experience by Christian laymen who speak glibly in the use of biblical figures in meetings for prayer and conference. Why do they talk on religious subjects in a dialect the like of which they never use on any other subject? Why clothe religious thought in metaphorical forms such as they would never think of imitating in the concerns of business? One reason is that they take the infection from the pulpit. If preachers envelop religious ideas in figure, to the detriment of the business-like character of preaching, hearers will bury their own religious experience under the same verbiage; and how much of it is a reality and how much romance, they may never know. This preachers do when they put propositions into figurative forms. If any thing is a business in the pulpit, and ought to take on the forms of plain, business-like speech, it is that calm unpoetic part of a sermon in which a preacher has merely to tell an audience what he proposes to talk about. There, if nowhere else, we should come at the intelligence of hearers by the shortest, plainest, most natural, and hence most literal way. We should use the dialect of our own times, not that of Spenser or Chaucer, and as little that of Baxter and John Howe. Instead of seeking to throw around a proposition the drapery of a venerable homiletic usage, we should

rather think of the mathematical definition of a straight line.

Figurative propositions and divisions are sometimes vindicated on the ground of their raciness. One preacher, martial in his tastes, proposes as his theme "the great battle of the Lord Almighty." Another, in more feminine mood, proposes to contemplate "the rainbow of divine promise." A third, of more practical turn, asks attention to "the sin of being a stumbling-block." A fourth, whose tastes incline to science, suggests "the anæsthetic power of the world over Christian hearts." A fifth canvasses the signs of the times, and proposes "the pioneer character of the church." A sixth meditates at eventide, and invites to "a walk about Zion." These, and an interminable catalogue like them, many would defend as being pithy forms of statement. They prick curiosity: they please fancy. True; but does this shield them from the censure of good taste? I think not; because, valuable as raciness of statement often is, it ought not to take the precedence of simplicity. In stating any business in hand, raciness should be sought in plainness of speech and directness in coming to the point. Figurative hints are out of place.

The taste which chooses figurative propositions and divisions is perilous to chasteness of style in other respects. A writer is never safe who indulges himself in one habit hostile to good taste. A certain integrity characterizes the decisions of good taste. Joubert says that it is "the literary conscience of the soul." He that is guilty in one point is guilty in all. You can never know to what friskiness of rhetorical judgment you may be tempted, if you tolerate in yourself one habit of conscious indifference to the claims of taste, or a single recognition of eccentric standards of taste.

In the third place, the simplicity of propositions and divisions requires that they should not be stated in the language of popular proverbs. "Honesty is the best policy;" "A penny saved is a penny earned;" "God helps those who help themselves;" "In the midst of life we are in death;" — why should not these be made the propositions of sermons? Christian discourses might be constructed on any one of them. But, because they are familiar proverbs, they have an atmosphere about them which is not kindred to that of simple speech. They are the pert remarks of the highway. Their original dignity is gone, and now they are pedestrian and dusty. Often they are the make-weights of pleasantry. A suspicion of eccentricity is awakened by their obtrusion as propositions of sermons. Eccentricity is not simplicity.

In the fourth place, simplicity in propositions and divisions demands still more imperatively the exclusion of fantastic forms of statement. From the text in Ezekiel respecting "the wheels" and the "living creatures," one preacher derived the proposition, "the wheels of providence." The Rev. Parson Moody of Boston, on the text, "They know not what they do," preached on the proposition, "when men know not what to do, they should be careful not to do they know not what." On the text, "This year thou shalt die," a quaint preacher in Hopkinton, Mass., once discoursed on this proposition, "nobody in Hopkinton will die this year."

We feel without comment the unseemliness of these propositions. But why are they not good forms of statement? What canon or instinct of good taste do they offend? I answer, that which requires simplicity in the statement of a theme. Earnest minds, pressed

by the duty of the pulpit as that of an exigency, have neither time nor taste for the creation of such sports of ingenuity.

Finally, simplicity in propositions and divisions requires the avoidance of extreme paradox in their forms of statement. A slight paradox is not inconsistent with a calm statement, but an extreme paradox implies excited statement. Simeon has a sermon on "the mutual abhorrence of God and sinners." This is not true. It sets a thoughtful hearer to recalling the text, "God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Whitefield has a discourse on the proposition, "persecution is the lot of every Christian." Either this is not true, or the vast majority of the Christian Church are hypocrites. William Jay expresses the truth more simply when he proposes to consider that "a Christian is not apt to be a favorite with the world." The Rev. Dr. Bushnell has published a sermon, the proposition of which is, in substance, "men are bound to do what they can not do." This is not true in any sense in which the popular mind will understand the language. You must either make the language figurative, or put into it one of the technicalities of polemic theology to make it true in any sense.

Some of these examples of propositions will be vindicated by some preachers, on the ground that they are fair paraphrases of certain biblical texts. Thus, in the prophecy of Zechariah, it is said of God, "My soul loathed them, and their soul also abhorred me." This certainly looks like "mutual abhorrence between God and sinners." Paul affirms, "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." This appears to sustain Whitefield. Doubtless, texts enough can be

found in the Scriptures, which, when woven together with adroit theologic fingers, make out an express command to men to do what they can not do. Dr. Bushnell's use of his text to this effect is not without plausibility. The inquiry, then, is a fair one, — does not the objection which rhetoric urges against such propositions lie with equal force against these biblical texts? I answer, No: simply because texts are not necessarily absolute propositions. Texts are limited by other texts, interpreted by contexts, illumined by occasions and events, qualified by the characters concerned in their delivery. Isolate them, as propositions are isolated, from these interpretive surroundings, and often they are not true. Texts, therefore, are not inspired models of propositions.

One object of a proposition often is to reduce to a literal and independent statement the truth which a text presents half buried in intricate relations. To translate the poetry of a text into logical prose, to exchange the metaphor of a text for the literalism of science, to evolve the simplicity of a text from the labyrinth of its antecedents, to transport the germ of a text from an oriental to an occidental atmosphere, — these are often the very purposes of propositions. Simplicity requires them, as it requires that diamonds should be polished, not worn in the rough.