

LESSON XXVII.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

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Continue constructing your sermon
utilizing the Cumulative Summary.

In the abuses of divisions, we are discussing solely the abuse of obvious (visible) divisions in presentation, not the divisions in the outline used by the preacher. The first is to meet the needs of the hearers while the latter is to meet the needs of the preacher only.

LECTURE XXVII.

THE DIVISION: EXPRESSION, MATERIALS.

5TH, Continuing the discussion of the visible expression of divisions, we notice in the fifth place certain obvious abuses of divisions.

(1) Of these may be named first the employment of any arbitrary number. William Jay says that he commonly made his sermons consist of five divisions. But why five, rather than seven, or three? A fixed number for which no reason can be given is an abuse. An ancient conceit of the pulpit was that of assigning to divisions some one of the so-called "sacred" numbers, — five, seven, twelve, forty.

The more frequent error of this class was one, relics of which remain to this day. It was that of a prescribed threefold division in honor of the Trinity. It is marvelous in how many different ways the piety of the mediæval Church expressed its reverence for this central doctrine of Christianity. The same spirit which led to the building of a church in the form of a cross, and to the cross in window-sashes and in the paneling of doors, induced preachers to work the idea of trinity into the mechanism of sermons. The mediæval mind saw trinity in every thing, from the Mosaic record of creation down to a three-leaved clover. One of the developments of this fancy was that of the trinitarian

division of a sermon. No matter what the subject, or its mode of treatment, the sermon must be confined or stretched, with procrustean uniformity, to three parts, no more, and no less. Some of our elder clergy, within my recollection, adhered to this as a matter of taste, perhaps without knowing its real origin. I once heard a sermon before an association of clergymen approved for consisting of three general divisions, each of which had three subdivisions, each of these being developed with three leading thoughts, and all followed by three inferences in the conclusion, and ending with the Trinitarian Doxology. The preacher should have delivered it in a three-cornered hat. Such a discourse is a miserable piece of trichotomy. The taste which could delight in it is like that which enjoys anagrams and acrostics. Persuasive speech is infinitely above it.

(2) A lawless multiplication of divisions is an abuse. Charnock's discourse on "The Being of God" has one hundred and two divisions; and his discourse on "Spiritual Worship" has one hundred and ten. One of his contemporaries preached to the extent of one hundred and seventy divisions. This is not yet an antiquated abuse. De Quincey's article on Hume's argument against miracles, though limited to twenty-four pages, has thirty-seven divisions; and another article from the same pen, of but thirty pages, has forty-one divisions. Such models are no more trustworthy than any other mania. Never whittle a subject for the amusement of it.

(3) Uniformity in the number of divisions is an abuse. Sermons should never be divided by habit. If you find yourself constructing every discourse with about the same number of general divisions, and about the same number of subdivisions, and about the same number of inferences and remarks, be assured that you

are falling into a mechanism of the pen. The life of your pulpit is dying out. The demands of subjects, of discussions, and of audiences, if well considered and obeyed, will necessitate variety.

(4) Generally it is an abuse to extend division beyond the second degree. Subdivisions of subdivisions will rarely, if ever, be distinguished as such by hearers. Few subjects which are fit for oral address in the pulpit need them, and common audiences are confused by them. In listening to such a sermon, the hearer, if his patience is not exhausted, is constantly feeling about mentally for the thread of discourse. But the great majority of ordinary hearers do not attempt to follow such a sermon at all. Whatever they get from it is in "shreds and patches," here and there. Consecutive discourse to them it is not.

(5) Visible division is an abuse, so far as it is framed for the convenience of the speaker alone. A good speaker must have more elaborate divisions in his own mind than a good hearer needs. Orderly discourse can not exist ideally without many invisible sections. To the speaker it is a convenience to state these visibly; but to the hearer this statement may complicate and encumber the subject. Concealment of your subdivision, therefore, may be a necessity to moral impression, if not to rhetorical perspicuity. Yet often the preacher's convenience overrides his practice. He maps out the discussion with excess of form, for his own use only.

(6) Visible division is an abuse so far as it exceeds the necessities of elaboration. This, again, is most frequently illustrated in needless subdivisions. Visible subdivision is elaborate form representing elaborate thinking. It is diagram representing science. Beyond the necessities of elaboration, form becomes not only

an incumbrance, but, what is worse, an affectation; for it pretends to an intricacy which does not exist. It thrusts upon the hearer a help which he does not need. It is like offering him a telescope to find his neighbor's house. The result is, that no one is relieved, but every one is encumbered.

(7) Visible division is an abuse, so far as it outweighs rhetorical force. In all oral speech, and especially in preaching, results depend much more on rhetorical impression than on scientific form. Science must therefore often yield to rhetoric in the structure and expansion of a sermon. Its structure must depend on its proposed expansion. Its frame must be such that it can be expanded forcibly. The table of contents of a book may be very perfect as a scientific structure; but it is dull reading, because it has no rhetorical force. It has no expansion: it is all form. It has as little eloquence as a triangle. So a sermon may be divided and subdivided till it is little else than a skeleton. A sermon of superior materials may break down under this excess of machinery. It may be elaborately thought out and as elaborately framed: its divisions may be accurate, and their order natural. As a scientific lecture it may be a model; but as a sermon it is arid and brittle: it wants spring, speed, wings. The first step in its improvement is to reduce its weight of form, abandon the double for the single series of divisions, make science succumb to rhetoric. You will soon discover that the single series of divisions is more easily handled than the double series in rhetorical expansion. It is more flexible. Said Prior of Dr. Johnson, "His reasoning is marshaled with the exactness of a heraldic procession, or the rank and file of an army." Something is wrong in a discourse in which that sense of

order is lifted above the sense of force. Specially in the pulpit our concern is chiefly with truth in its rhetorical rather than in its scientific forms. We must divide and arrange discourse as orators, not as scientific lecturers, nor as academic teachers.

III. The third general topic of the discussions before us is that of the materials of divisions; that is, the thoughts of which they should be composed. Respecting these, the following are the fundamental principles.

1st, A division of a discourse should be necessary to the development of its proposition. The proposition is the plan in the germ: the plan is the proposition unfolded. Every division in the plan, therefore, should be essential to the expansion of the proposition. It should grow out of the proposition, and live upon the proposition, as a branch grows out of and lives upon the root of a tree. It should be impossible to see how the proposition in hand could dispense with the division in hand.

Preachers may learn a lesson from the best writers of fiction. They study the necessities of the narrative. They keep to the probabilities of history. Mr. Dickens tells us, that, while he was publishing "The Old Curiosity Shop" as a serial story, he received letters from friends and strangers on both sides of the Atlantic, begging him not to give a tragic ending to the story by the death of "little Nell." But those letters were to his mind evidence that the tragic ending was the necessary one, because the only natural one. Else, why did readers forebode it? That instinctive foreboding was an instinctive decree of art. So Mr. Dickens reasoned, and he refused to obey the suggestions of his correspondents. This kind of study of the necessities of a theme is needed in the construction of sermons.

We can not neglect it, and yet present truth in natural relations.

(1) To be necessary to a proposition, a division must be comprised in that proposition. Lord Bacon once theorized that a birch-tree might grow from the root of a felled oak. Divisions are sometimes grafted upon propositions on a similar theory. A division is often relevant to the general subject when it is not so to the proposition. It belongs to the same genus, but does not come under the species. The preacher is deceived, and classifies loosely. Your proposition is to consider the doctrine of intercession: why, then, should a division be given to remarks upon prayer in the general? Your proposition is to treat of the sin of ingratitude: why, then, devote a division to depravity? Your proposition is to urge the duty of repentance: why, then, bestow a division upon a general exhortation to a religious life? Much aimless preaching would be avoided, if preachers would adhere more rigidly to the distinction that relevancy to subject is not necessarily relevancy to proposition.

This principle, again, is sometimes violated by an unphilosophical use of biblical passages parallel to the text. Some preachers, with the laudable aim of being biblical preachers, make an unwarranted use of their reference Bibles. I can not better illustrate this error than by citing some fragments from Dr. James Alexander. Of his own method of sermonizing at one period of his ministry he writes, "Another method which I pursued was to choose a text, and then, having written out in full all the parallel passages, to classify them, and found my divisions on this classification. I flattered myself that this was a happy method, because it made my sermon scriptural."

But observe this method for a moment. "Classification" of what? Of the materials of the text? No. Of the materials of a proposition derived from the text? No. Of the natural surroundings of the text or theme? No. But of the parallel passages found in Bagster's Bible. It is impossible that such divisions should fail to contain irrelevant material. Dr. Alexander soon found this out, and ingenuously confesses it. He says, "The *nexus* between the texts was factitious, often refined and recondite, always more obvious to the writer than to the reader. It prevented the flow of thought in a natural channel. It was like a number of lakes connected by artificial canals. The discourse was disjointed, and over-laden with texts. One passage of Scripture suggested unsought is worth a hundred lugged in *collo obtorto*." All artifices for making a sermon scriptural defeat themselves. Biblical thought runs in natural channels. It is all in rivers, never in canals. Force it into canals, and you get nothing but stagnant water.

(2) To be necessary to a proposition, a division must be founded on a real distinction from every other division. Distinction without real difference is often the defect of two consecutive divisions. Difference of phraseology is accepted as difference of thought. Difference in the materials of development may conceal the fact that there is no difference of divisions. Maesillon, in one of his charges to his clergy, discourses on "The Spirit of the Ministry of the Gospel" as being; 1. A spirit of separation from the world; 2. A spirit of prayer; 3. A spirit of zeal; 4. A spirit of labor; 5. A spirit of knowledge; 6. A spirit of piety. Of these divisions the last is inclusive of all the rest.

(3) To be necessary to a proposition, a division must

be founded on an important distinction from all the other divisions. One variety of error in this respect is very deceptive. It is that in which a division unimportant in itself is advanced for the sake of interesting materials which can be introduced under it. We sometimes hear discourses in which the divisions give no hint of the materials of interest in the discussion. The salient things in the discourse are not the leading thoughts: they are incidents, illustrations, antitheses, quotations, paradoxes, or other artful expedients of composition. They do not suggest the ground-work of thought; nor are they forcibly suggested by it. The outline of the sermon, therefore, is not needed for its own sake. It is only the string for the beads. Such selection of the materials of division is unnatural; yet, executed by a genius, it may be delusive. Some fascinating composition of this kind is found in all literatures. It is the chief defect in the writings of De Quincey. His "Confessions of an Opium-Eater" is an entire volume constructed in this way. He himself so describes it. A discourse thus framed may contain passages of great power and brilliancy; but as a structure of thought it is unnatural. The power to write in this way is a dangerous one: it tempts a preacher to artifice and clap-trap.

2d, A second principle respecting the materials of divisions is the converse of the one last named. It is that the divisions as a whole should fully develop the proposition. Not only should no needless divisions be introduced, but no necessary divisions should be omitted. Collectively the divisions should be a complete discussion of the proposition.

(1) Upon this topic, observe a principle which we have had occasion to notice before, — that exhaustion

of a proposition is not exhaustion of a subject. The prolix discourses of some of the English and Scotch divines grew out of a failure to recognize this distinction. Hence their interminable divisions. Their conclusions especially are omniferous. They include applicatory divisions sufficient for two or three discourses. A doctrine thus treated is like a light in a grotto of gems. The glow of the wealth discovered is dazzling; but beyond the confused sense of affluence of applicatory thought one receives no impression. No focal density of thought attracts us. This is the necessary result of an attempt to exhaust a great subject.

(2) That divisions may fully develop a proposition, the proposition and divisions should be so invented as to fit together. There are always two ways of fitting two things to each other: you may stretch the one, or contract the other. A very common illustration of this occurs in the adjustment of propositions to divisions by the use of a qualifying word or phrase in the form of the proposition. You wish, for instance, to consider the reasons for a certain duty; but you find that you can not discuss all those reasons. Perhaps you do not know them all. It is hazardous to promise all the reasons for any thing. Perhaps you have not time to discuss them all: yet you can discuss a certain group of them, which shall have weight and unity. What shall be done? Qualify your proposition by some modal phrase. Say, "Let us consider *some* of the reasons;" or, "a *few* of the reasons;" or, "the more *important* reasons," etc. A study of the proposition and the divisions relatively to each other is needful in order to disclose where the proper guard is to be applied against the danger of a failure to match.

(3) Divisions do not fully develop a proposition, if they do not sustain its intrinsic dignity. A profound proposition superficially treated, an affluent theme meagerly treated, a novel subject tritely treated indicate unfortunate omissions, which the divisions ought to have supplied. On the standard themes of the pulpit a certain fund of popular thought exists below which a sermon on one of those themes ought not to fall. They are great subjects. They are susceptible of such discussion as shall produce a great impression. The popular mind feels them to be great, and as such reveres them. The history of the pulpit has made them great in their homiletic forms. Great minds have discoursed upon them, and lifted them to a lofty niche in the popular conceptions of them. Very unequal sermons may be preached upon them by unequal minds. But a meager sermon upon one of them should never be preached by any one. More evil than good would be the natural result of such a sermon. If we can not confirm the work of our predecessors in the discussion of the grand themes of the pulpit, we, at least, should not undo it by our imbecility. For such subjects, our best efforts should be reserved. Our best health, our most profound and penetrative studies, our most elastic moods, our most affluent religious experiences should be expended upon them. Even thus, we shall not equal these imperial themes. But we may equal, and more than equal, the existing popular thought upon them. If not, our call to preach needs revision.

The most serious omissions in preaching are of materials the absence of which obscures the evangelical spirit of the discourse. If a subject naturally leads thought to Christ, it is the saddest of all omissions to leave out Christ. Yet this may be done with

no irreverent design. I once heard a sermon on "The Holiness of God," the divisions of which were restricted to the intimations of divine holiness in the material universe. Yet it is impossible to develop that subject well, without assigning the central place to the illustration of it furnished by the divine work of Atonement for the sins of man. The sermon disclosed this by its glaring omissions. Intellectually considered, it was a superior production; but it was well-nigh useless as a sermon on that theme. If the proposition had been to consider "The intimations of the divine holiness in the material universe," and only those, the case would have been entirely changed, and the evil avoided. The divisions then would have matched the proposition. But as they stood the proposition pointed to the center, and the divisions to the outskirts, of the theme. The very heart of it, as it opens to a thoughtful mind, was left a blank. Sermons which thus omit the evangelical elements of a subject are as ungainly as they are inefficient. The loss of a limb is a deformity as well as an inconvenience. But what of the loss of a head?

3d, A third principle respecting the materials of divisions is that they should consist of the most powerful thoughts which a mastery of the subject discovers. Two things in this principle are to be emphasized,—mastery of subjects, and the use only of selected materials. Defect in either is loss of power.

(1) The secret of weakness in many sermons is premature discussion. A glance at the outline of a discourse is often sufficient to show that the preacher is not ready to discuss that theme. He has not mastered it. He has worked in the dark. Collateral bearings of it have not been well explored. The divisions are

inadequate, because he has not had the subject well in hand. Statements are made, therefore, which need to be qualified, or understatements are made which need to be intensified. Till you know a subject all around and all through, you are not competent to affirm with confidence any broad range of discussion respecting it.

(2) A still more frequent evil is poverty of materials. This, too, the plan of a sermon will often discover. The divisions are not the rich products of a full mind. They are not select materials. They hint at no unspoken reserves. In discourse, as in war, power often lies in reserved forces. The possession of such unexpressed resources affects the whole movement of masterly discussion. Without that mastery of subjects which allows selection, a discourse can not be radically strengthened by criticism of details. Criticism must go back to the preliminary study of the theme.

(3) The view here expressed should modify the objections often urged against "great" sermons. Intellectual preaching is objectionable only so far as the intellectual strain is disproportioned to the spiritual fervor. In this one principle of proportion lies the gist of the whole argument on the subject. This balance being well preserved, it may be safely said, that, the more intellectual our preaching is, the better it is. This is as true as is its converse,—that, the more spiritual preaching is, the better it is. Each element is the complement of the other in the true ideal of a sermon.

There is a very obvious sense, then, in which sermons must be "great." They must embody the best materials germane to their subjects; and this, realized in any pulpit, will, in the long-run, create a "great" pulpit. In no other way can we eradicate from the

popular mind effeminate and quiddling tastes, which, if encouraged, doom the pulpit to degeneracy. You can not improve such tastes by preaching to them or at them. The way to lift the people above them is not by a direct dead lift, but by a certain leverage of preaching which can not be understood by a weak or listless mind. To create strength, you must give strength. Put into your pulpit the strength of the everlasting hills, and it will not need the coruscations of the *Aurora borealis*. Give to your preaching the vividness of the lightning, and your people will not crave the phosphorescence of fireflies.

In an age like ours, no pulpit can succeed, which, like the pulpit of Germany, lives, in large disproportion, upon the natural spirituality of womanhood and the innocence of childhood. These must be supplemented by the intellectual strength of a nation, or the pulpit can not exist as a national power. And, to command the strength, it must *be* strength. Great and timely subjects, thorough discussions, weight and fullness of selected materials, costly thoughts, — these, immersed in the depths of an intense spiritual nature, must constitute the popular preaching of the age, or the time is not distant when no preaching will be popular. All this reduced to few and plain words means that we must have great preachers, who shall give great sermons on great themes, composed of the best materials which such themes furnish to an educated mind. To the utmost of each one's ability we must be such preachers; and each one's conscience must be trained, by a thoughtful rather than an effervescent piety, to bear the intellectual strain which such preaching creates.

Is this theory a temptation to clerical ambition?

Yes: it is open to that abuse. But the peril must be met, as other moral perils must be, in doing the work of a world's necessity. The greater the deed, the greater the probationary peril in the doing: this is the law of all great achievement. The supreme temptation in this world's history assailed Him who came to it in supreme self-sacrifice. The trial, so far as we can judge of it, came in this very form of appeal to His human ambition, through the dawning consciousness of divine power over divine opportunity. Similar is the moral danger of an intellectual pulpit; and that is tyranny over a weak conscience which holds a preacher back from the encounter by religious scruples.