

LESSON XXX.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

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LECTURE XXX.

THE DEVELOPMENT: DEFINITION, PREREQUISITES, CHARACTERISTICS.

WE have now considered, with one exception, all those parts of a sermon which properly belong to its frame-work. The theme next in order is that which has been denominated the development.

I. In the criticism of a sermon the term "development" may be used to designate one or more of the following things: the entire sermon as related to the text the proposition and divisions of a sermon as related to the subject, or the divisions alone as related to the proposition. It is, yet again, restricted more narrowly to the amplification of each separate division of the discourse, and of all of them collectively. The text, the proposition, and the divisions being given, criticism designates the remainder of the sermon as the "development," and applies the term either to a division separately, or to all the divisions collectively. If true to its object, the development is an unfolding of the salient thoughts expressed in the divisions, and no more. In this sense, the work of development is the composition of the sermon as distinct from the planning of it. It is the doing of the thing proposed in the plan. It is the clothing of the skeleton of the sermon with the elements of effective discourse. It is in this

last and most limited sense that I employ the word in discussing the development as one of the constituent parts of a sermon.

The work of developing, as distinct from the planning of a discourse, defines itself in practice beyond the possibility of mistake. You doubtless are sensible of this in your own experience. When you have chosen a text, evolved a proposition, and outlined a plan of a sermon, the bulk of your work is, in the majority of cases, yet to be executed. You are now to amplify, to expand, to unfold, to evolve, to fill up, to enlarge upon, to develop, — whatever you may call it; and the thing is clearly distinct from any other process concerned in the building of a sermon. To many preachers it is a work of much greater difficulty than is involved in any other process. It sets invention at work more severely, and calls into service a greater variety of mental powers, than does any other part of a discourse.

II. Let it be observed, then, that the foundation of a good development is laid in certain things which precede its execution.

1st, Of these prerequisites should be named, the possession of the right quantity and quality of materials. Obviously, if your mind is filled with only anatomical materials, you must fail in the attempt to make them live in a breathing sermon. Moreover, a certain degree of fullness of mind with right material is essential to forcible development. Sparse thoughts invite feeble utterance, even of that which a man has to say. Thoughts must crowd thoughts, that any thing may come out with force. It is the full fountain which bubbles to the surface. We often speak of digested and undigested thought. The figure is apt. A healthy stomach is a coarse symbol, but a true one, of a healthy

mind. Physicians tell us that a certain quantity of food in the digestive organs is necessary to vigorous digestion. Similar to this are certain mental operations. Fullness of mind on a subject of thought is essential to the best utterance of thought. Solid thought is requisite. Powerful utterance must be the outflow of a well-stocked brain.

(1) Yet on this topic of the invention of materials criticism can, in my judgment, say very little that is of practical use. The ancient rhetoricians — the only great ones the world has known — thought otherwise; and it requires some courage to dissent from them in this thing. They elaborated very carefully the hints by which they imagined that a mind in composing, or preparing to compose, could be assisted in gathering its stock of thought. It was believed that the mind might put out certain feelers into any subject, and invent, accordingly, both the divisions and the development of discourse. Possibly the early thinkers of the race found practical help in these artificial aids; but of what use are they now? What modern author or speaker has ever consciously employed them? Certain it is that the literary and professional world has laid them aside. The stock of the world's thought has grown large, and authorship and speech now live upon that. I can explain in no other way the fact that expedients which Aristotle — perhaps the master-mind of the race — could commend are never adopted by the leaders of modern thought.

(2) The oratorical instinct, at least, claims freedom from such artificial helps. All that criticism can do, therefore, for its assistance in the matter of invention, is to direct it to the cultivation of the thinking power. In actual composing, a writer must take what comes to

him, with no such elaborate searching in prescribed channels of inquiry. I know nothing of any process of successful composition which has not in it a large infusion of the element which the world calls "chance." As a Christian preacher, I willingly give to it a more sacred name. That preacher is not to be envied who knows nothing in his own experience of a secondary fulfillment of the promise: "It shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak." Yet divine suggestion uses, not ignores, the laws of mind.

(3) When, therefore, a division of discourse presents a blank to your mind which you do not know how to fill, set your mind to thinking upon it. Fix the mind on the thing in hand: check rambling thought: have done with reverie. This is the first and the vital thing. Then group together all that you do know of the matter. Something you know, or you could not state your thought. Use that something as a bait to suggestion. Follow it into its natural surroundings. Write it down, and thus obtain the suggestive aid of the eye. A pen in hand, and an eye on a written thought are marvelous allies to the thinking power. Use in this manner whatever of the common stock of thought on any subject you find in present possession. The stock will grow upon your hands inevitably. The law of your experience will be that to him that hath shall be given.

(4) If, by such self-disciplinary communings, you originate nothing worth saying, resort to suggestive reading for a while. Read any thing which stimulates thinking. You have probably discovered in your libraries, before this time, one or two authors whom you never can read for a half-hour listlessly. They are awakening powers to your power. Your mind always

springs at their bidding. They have become your intellectual auxiliaries and friends. Turn to such volumes, and use them for the stimulus which they furnish. The thing needed is a mental awakening and uplifting which shall bring within your range of vision a broader intellectual scenery. Thus uplifted, the mind obtains inspiration, and, thus inspired, it may go back to the thing in hand, tremulous with inventive ardor. Such a process, or something equivalent to it, you will find to be effective in breaking the dead-lock which is often so discouraging to a young preacher, and which seems to spring from vacancy of mind. There is no such thing as vacancy of mind. The dead-lock ceases the instant that you succeed in putting an end to reverie. One of the remedies of physical lock-jaw is a smart charge from an electric battery. Similar is the remedy for a speechless mind.

If any one finds practical assistance from conducting the thinking process by the categories of the ancient rhetoricians, there can be no objection. But I have yet to see the youthful preacher who does find practical aid in such devices, or the practised writer who ever employs them. With such self-disciplinary use as I have advised of the materials which one finds at spontaneous command on any theme, the oratorical instinct of an educated mind may be safely left to work its own way to the requisite increase of stock. The difficulty is mental inertia, and, when that is removed, mental floundering. Get rid of these, and production follows in orderly and rich abundance, like that of any other work of creation.

2d, But this work of inventing materials suggests another prerequisite of a good development. It is a settlement of the question, What kind of treatment

does the thought in hand require? The question to be asked is, What does this division need in order to bend its development to the aim of the sermon? Is there any thing here to be explained, any thing to be proved, any thing to be intensified by illustration, any thing to be applied by direct hortation? Some one of these elements of all composing must be needed. If more than one are needed, the inquiry is, In what proportion and in what order shall the two or more be intermingled? Consciously or unconsciously, every mind in the act of successful composition does propose to itself, and does answer, these inquiries. They are the nearest approach which modern authorship makes to the use of the Aristotelian categories.

On the other hand, the incongruous character of many discourses is due mainly to inattention to such inquiries. If you prove when you ought to illustrate, or illustrate when you ought to prove, or do either or both when you ought to explain, or prove, illustrate, and explain when you ought to exhort, or exhort when you ought to do any thing else rather than that, you inevitably flounder into an incongruous and inefficient development. No amount or intrinsic excellence of materials can atone for the loss of the fundamental virtue of speaking to the point.

It becomes, then, an inquiry of vital moment to a good development, How shall a preacher judge when to explain, when to prove, when to illustrate, when to exhort, and when and how to intermingle these processes? Beyond a few simple hints, the oratorical instinct must be left to act at its own discretion. Criticism can only make the following suggestions.

(1) Judge, in part, by the genius of the subject. On the very face of it a subject may demand one

method of treatment, and as decisively repel another. Some themes must be treated, if presented at all to a popular audience, by illustration mainly. Others must be treated argumentatively. To the one class, argument would be frigid; to the other class, an imperative necessity. For example; consider for a moment the two subjects, "The Love of Christ," and "The Extent of the Atonement." Suppose that you develop the first of these argumentatively, and the second historically. You prove that Christ loved man, and you describe pictorially the range of the Atonement. It is not difficult to see, that, in each of these cases, the genius of the subject enters a protest. The two themes need to change places. You have proved where you should have painted, and painted where you should have reasoned. Your sky is green, and your grass, blue.

(2) Judge of the method of treatment, in part, by the character of the audience. An illiterate audience may require an explanatory sermon on a topic of which a cultured audience may demand proof, and an audience of children a pictorial discussion. Many hortatory sermons have been preached in college chapels, but never one as a *concio ad clerum* in the week of commencement. The character of the audience obviously determines to common sense the rhetorical development of many discourses. The oratorical instinct must be woefully warped or indolent, if it fails to respond, in many instances, to the necessities of the case in hand, without any other hint than this given by the character of the audience. Rarely will it be so distorted as in the case of one preacher in the chapel of this seminary, who developed one division of his sermon in the form of an exhortation to aged sinners, at a time when the only gray-haired man in the house was a saint of sixty years' growth.

(3) Judge of the method of treatment, in part, by the demands of the occasion. The key to the problem is sometimes found in the occasion; not in the subject, not in the hearers. Is the occasion exceptional? Is it a funeral, a Thanksgiving, a Fast Day, a Christmas, a New-Year's Day? Is there a peculiar state of things among the people? Are they in a religious revival? Are they on the eve of one? Are they in the wake of one? Are they in a religious decline? In the midst of a powerful religious excitement, it is surprising what an amount of hortation an audience will bear with quick response of conscience, when the half of it at any other time would stupefy them. On the other hand, when the wave of revival has receded, the effect is painful, if the pulpit struggles to perpetuate the quantity and quality of hortatory discussion which the revival created a demand for, but which now falls on satiated ears. Such untimely exhortation is like hammering iron when its red-heat is gone.

(4) Judge of rhetorical development, in part, by the recent proportions of your preaching, in respect to its rhetorical character. If argumentative discourse has largely preponderated in your pulpit for a while, that may be a sufficient reason for a change. Follow such an argumentative period with illustrative sermons. The need of such may properly have a retrospective bearing, and may direct your choice of subjects. Change the diet, and you may promote the more robust health. Other things being equal, the most versatile pulpit is the most effective. Few things which need so much study receive so little as the adjustment of proportions in the pulpit.

(5) Judge of the rhetorical treatment, in part, by personal tastes, information, and moods. I group these

three things together as expressive of a preacher's individuality respecting the point before us. This criterion is more frequently abused than normally used. But abuse is no argument against man'y use. You may sometimes be wise in treating a subject in that method in which you will probably succeed most happily. This will sometimes be that into which your own tastes enable you to enter most enthusiastically. It may now and then be that which your present information will enable you to execute most intelligently. It may occasionally be that in which a present mood of feeling may enable you to compose most rapidly, and therefore most intensely. Within certain guarded limits, a preacher's individuality has a claim to authority. In this, as in other things, a man's best work is happy work. It is whole-souled work. It is work to which the mind springs expectantly, even jubilantly. God never meant that any man should work wretchedly. Dejection is never a divine teaching. God has never designed that a man's work should be against the grain of his intellectual make. This is pre-eminently true of the work of the pulpit. The most effective preachers are elastic and joyous men. Eternal decrees written in a preacher's mental constitution lie back of the best of sermons.

These suggestions comprise the substance of all that criticism can wisely say to the oratorical instinct respecting the choice of rhetorical method in the development of discourses. Beyond these, criticism knows nothing, and needs to know nothing. Mother-wit does all the rest. To that instinct thus disciplined there are no impracticable subjects, unless they are dead subjects. Good sermons can thus be made on any subjects which have living roots in Christian thought.

3d, The third of those prerequisites to a good development, which lie back of its execution, is a certain mental dexterity which comes from practice only. In every art there is a knack which is never a gift. It is the fruit of an apprenticeship. I stand in awe of a carpenter, a tailor, a machinist, a locksmith, a sailor, who are well to do at their trades. They manipulate their work with such marvelous adroitness, that to me it is miracle. They are all experts from another world than mine. Their arms, fingers, legs, feet, eyes seem inspired. Their very shoulders have motions of use which I can no more imitate than I can the swoop of an eagle. They put soul into dead matter. A carpet-loom, the work of somebody's genius, has iron fingers more sensitive than mine. Its dumb lips pronounce verdict upon a defective thread which my eyes can not see, even when it stops to give time for a search. They who do these things ask me what they can do for me, and I can only mumble, "What shall be done?" They are the wise men, and I am the fool. Yet not a man of them was born inspired. Not one escaped the drudgery of an apprenticeship, long and hard, and inflexible as fate.

The same principle holds good in literary working. How to do it never comes from knowing only what to do. It comes, in part, from doing. It comes from failures, awkwardness, blunders, despairs, infinitesimal beginnings of success, happy hits which are never repeated, and the slow growth of faculties which a man can never outrun in composing. They hold him back to give them time to grow. A good development of a thought is never achieved without this knack of doing the right thing. Moreover, this knack of doing is always a specialty. We must drill for the specific

thing we have to do. We can never succeed by apprenticeship to the universe in general. An author does not get the knack of oral discourse from the making of books. A critic does not get the knack of preaching from the criticism of sermons. Journalists say that it is no matter what a man can do in the making of books, sermons, speeches: he can not write well for the newspapers, till he has served his time at it. They are right. A man can do nothing well till he has "served his time at it."

This need of mental dexterity in good preaching I notice, not because criticism can do much to promote it, but because the fact of its existence, and the laws of its growth, are a great encouragement to young preachers. It should teach you not to waste yourselves in fruitless despair, or fears of failure. Of course you will fail. Make up your minds to failure. Expect to waste a great many sermons. Expect to see some of your best sermons slipping out of your hands, and taking to themselves wings of flame. But be assured that every such discovery of failure is a germ of success. You are uplifted by so much height as you consciously stand above your yesterday's work. You have only to lay out on a present effort the best of your present power, and that very effort begets power. Thus your mind grows with perpetual increments of the knack of doing.

III. Passing, now, from these fundamental prerequisites of a good development, which lie back of its execution, let us observe, in the third place, the chief characteristics of a good development.

1st, Of these the first is unity. A division amplified is a discourse in miniature. Its singleness is essential to secure speaking to the point.

(1) Unity is specially sacrificed by an unconscious discussion of different things with one heading. This may arise from the confounding of similar ideas. A division is upon the Christian grace of patience; but the train of thought branches off into remarks upon fortitude, resignation, fidelity. The resemblance of these passive graces misleads; and a development which begins with one thing ends with another. This indiscriminate composing is the cause of a vast amount of remark in sermons upon religion in general. Every religious thought has some sort of affiliation with every other religious thought. Weak thinking has always a gravitation downward from the species to the genus. It is deceived by a resemblance into the utterance of platitudes.

Another form of the same defect is a confusion arising from resemblance or sameness of words. Two words resembling each other may form an arch, over which the development passes from the thing in hand to the thing in the other hand. Have you not listened to sermons in which the guilt of selfishness was condemned in a strain of remark which involved the condemnation of all forms of self-love? Few theological blunders are fraught with so much mischief in the delusion of conscience as is the one involved in that confusion of terms. The sameness of a word in different senses is more frequently still the switch which sends the train upon a false track. Some preachers of long experience, probably have never preached a self-consistent sermon on faith, because the word is susceptible of such a variety of meanings.

Another way in which unity of development may be unconsciously sacrificed is by the confusion of thought springing from the indefiniteness of figurative language.

When figurative language droops its wings, and becomes literal, the truth which it expressed in the air may become a falsehood on the ground. Yet a preacher not sharp in watching the change may affirm both in one paragraph. A vast amount of turbid discussion about our "guilty nature" has had its origin in this unconscious transition from figure to letter, and from letter to figure. The figure is made to drop its poetic sense; and in the same breath a sermon discusses interchangeably constitutional depravity and willful sin. In the discussion of central doctrines of our faith, this unconscious passing from the figure to the letter makes sad havoc with theological consistency.

One other form of this defect arises from pressing to an extreme the suggestions of analogy. One of the most difficult things to conduct well in discourse is the use of analogies. The difficulty is owing chiefly to the double use which may be made of them. Analogy may prove a thing; but, again, it may only illustrate a thing. The difficulty, therefore, if the aim is argument, is to stop where proof ends, and not to pursue the analogy into remote bearings in which it becomes illustration only. I once heard the boy's game of marbles adduced as logical evidence of the earth-born origin of man. "See," said the wise man, "no sooner does the snow melt in the spring, and uncover the soil, than down goes human nature on all-fours to greet and grovel on mother-earth." Whatever else this was, argument it was not. Yet much of that which goes by the name of analogous reasoning suffers from thus pursuing analogy beyond the province of logic into the domain of fancy, without consciousness of the transition.