

LESSON XXXII.

LECTURE XXXII.

THE CONCLUSION: DEFINITION, CAUSES OF WEAKNESS.

I. IN what respect is the conclusion of a sermon distinct from the other parts of it? This inquiry is answered, in part, by the titles given to the conclusion in the nomenclature of the pulpit. In the practice of the older preachers we find it under the title of "uses" of the subject of discourse. President Edwards and many others commonly call the conclusion the "application" of the subject, and of its discussion. Dr. Emmons and often Dr. Finney term this part of a discourse the "improvement" of the subject. Dr. Dwight almost invariably designates it by the word "remarks," yet rarely by the term "inferences." Others adopt the less specific title of "reflections;" and some propose to conclude a sermon with "observations." This diversity of nomenclature is no evidence of indefiniteness in the conception of the thing. A single element distinguishes every variety of conclusion technically so called.

1st, The characteristic idea of the conclusion is *application* of the subject to results in advance of its discussion. President Edwards has the most exact and comprehensive title for it. The theory of the conclusion presupposes a theme discussed, which is now to be applied to something. It is to be used for a further

purpose. It is to be improved as an advantage gained for a sequel. It is to be reviewed, for the sake of practical remarks, observations, reflections. It is a premise from which inferences are to be drawn. The intense practicalness of a sermon is hinted in the characteristic idea of its ending. That is not a sermon which is intellectual discussion pure and simple.

2d, It should be observed, however, that this practical application of a subject, which we term the "conclusion," is not necessarily made to the will of the hearer. It may be an application of truth to any other faculty of the mind. For example, a truth discussed may be used to explain another truth: the fact of an Atonement established discloses the nature of sin. A truth discussed may be used, also, to intensify another truth: the fact of an Atonement established illustrates the love of God. Again: a truth discussed may be used to prove another truth: from the doctrine of human depravity, that of future retribution is an inference. Once more: a truth proved, illustrated, or explained may be further used as a force of direct hortation. Here, only, in all these varieties of application, is the will of the hearer directly approached. On the basis of any important truth of our religion, you may legitimately build a direct appeal.

A conclusion, then, may involve any or all of the radical processes of composition. It may explain, illustrate, prove, persuade, or all combined and intertwined. It may be the most complicated process in the whole structure of a sermon. It is susceptible of the most varied and ingenious methods of procedure. The culmination of a preacher's power may often be seen in these few closing paragraphs. Your utmost force of character as a man may use here, unconsciously to you,

your utmost skill as an orator and the richest treasures of your scholarship. The ancient orators proved themselves masters of many of the very same resources which the pulpit needs, when they put the supreme strain of their personal force into the outpouring of their perorations.

3d, Again: we must observe that a conclusion, as distinct from other parts of a discourse, is not necessarily restricted to the chronological termination. We must tolerate the paradox: the conclusion may be other than the *finis* of a sermon. Its characteristic idea is not the chronological ending, but the rhetorical end. It is the result which the sermon is made for. Its characteristic idea, of application, permits its distribution throughout the body of a sermon, in place of its concentration at the close.

4th, This applicatory portion of a sermon, wherever it occurs, is strikingly indicative of the intensity of preaching. Preaching is always for an object, always aimed at a practical result, never for dalliance with entertaining materials. No other part of a sermon therefore defines itself more positively. No matter if it be scattered in fragments through a discourse, those fragments all point one way: they are all directed by one aim. One query tests them all, Are they applicatory of the theme in hand, to something in advance of that? If not, they have no place where they stand: if they are, they are unlike all other materials in the sermon, and are identical in rhetorical character with each other.

As thus defined, the conclusion is obviously of prime importance in a sermon. Theoretically, it should seem, no part of a sermon can excel it. It may appear superfluous to argue this; yet the history of the pulpit gives great significance to the inquiry to which we now proceed.

II. What are the most disastrous drawbacks to the applicatory power in preaching?

1st, You anticipate me in naming, as the most obvious yet the most effective of these, the want of spiritual consecration in the preacher.

(1) Here the fact is fundamental, that, when we demand of a preacher that he be an eminently holy man, we only affirm in religious dialect one of the first principles of oratorical science. Eloquence in all its forms is built on, or more significantly is built *in*, intense character in the man. This is as fundamental to secular as to sacred eloquence. No man can be eloquent in any thing, who has not, *quoad hoc*, an intense working of his own character. His personal intelligence, his personal faith, his personal consciousness of an object, the utmost strain of his will-power are the vitalizing forces. Not adroitness in command of language, not zeal in the form of paroxysm, but the character of the man, in an intense unity of purpose, is the soul of speech in those lofty forms of it which we dignify as oratory. Therefore, in a teacher of religion, the force of speech is weakened by any thing which debilitates religious character, or suspends its working to the purpose in hand. A type of religious experience which deadens a preacher's personal faith in the truth he preaches may create a paralysis equivalent to that of downright unbelief. Theatrical working has even less force in the pulpit than in secular address.

(2) Hence we find, as we might reasonably expect to find, that, in the experience of the pulpit, the most vital changes for good have been spiritual changes in the men who have administered its utterances. "Restore unto *me* the joy of thy salvation; . . . and sinners shall be converted." The penitent Psalmist

here declares the law of all eminent success in the preaching of the gospel. An uplifting from a lower to a higher plane of religious life is sure to declare itself in a reduplication of power. The vital power in the preacher is the vitalizing power to the hearer. This is one of the most invariable of the discovered laws in the working of the Holy Ghost.

Yet in the pressure and ferment of ministerial duty, involving as it does the interplay of complicated motives, a sore temptation is encountered to be forgetful of this principle, and to work with the full machinery of intellectual industry in motion, with little or no care for spiritual conditions. Preaching is, intellectually, a work of great severity. Taking its continuity into account, no other professional labor, year in and year out, equals it. It is a marvelous absorbent of the mental forces. Said Dr. James Alexander on a certain occasion, "The last sermon I wrote is the least evangelical I ever wrote. Yet this did not once enter into my head till I had finished." The intellectual force of the preacher had so overpowered the spiritual force of the man, that he could compose a sermon of feeble evangelical spirit without knowing it.

Turn, for illustration of this law, to the memoirs of Chalmers, of Robert Hall, of Doddridge, of Norman McLeod. Revolutionary changes in the pulpits of these men were consequent upon religious changes in the men. Those improvements in the men deserve study. They were significant of a first principle in the history of the pulpit. Specially were they no superficial increments of feeling. They were not ebullitions of zeal consequent upon temporary exigencies. They were not meteoric excitements produced by the force of sympathy. They were permanent growths in sanctified

character. For the most part, they developed themselves in retirement. Chalmers encountered the decisive change in his ministry in the stillness of Kilmany. His humble cottagers found it out before he did. The fruit of such elemental changes is godliness in its etymological sense of godlikeness. Serene it may be, like the sensibility of an Infinite Mind. A fire in the soul it is, but a fire without crackling or flame, — the concentrated and still heat of a bed of kindled anthracite.

(3) One sequence of such sanctified growth often is the creation of an adroit instinct of persuasion. Perhaps thinking less, and caring less, than ever before about oratorical art, the man becomes inspired with an unconscious oratorical genius. He becomes a living power in the pulpit, without knowing it. By that which seems an inborn tact, like the swing of the right arm, he finds his way to hearts. He becomes inexhaustibly inventive of means and methods and auxiliaries of success.

(4) Another phenomenon of that preaching which is distinguished by the intensity of its applicatory force is a singular elevation, which imparts to it devotional power. Are there not certain portions of the Scriptures, not devotional in form, which are so in their profoundest impression upon us? We find them to be devotional helps. Their themes are so lofty, their range of thought is so elevated yet so simple, their emotive fervor is so concentrated yet so tranquil, that in the reading the mind rises Godward intuitively. Portions of the Epistles are of this character. Pre-eminently such are the discourses of our Lord. The line which separates them from prayer is scarcely felt by one whose mind is lifted into full sympathy with them. The reader may naturally reverse them, and utter them in devout address to their author.

Why has the Church for ages chanted the Apostles Creed as an act of worship? It was the opinion of Dr. Arnold, that "creeds in public worship should be used as triumphant hymns of thanksgiving." That such things as our creeds affirm are true is the joy of right-minded being throughout the universe. The songs of heaven, of which the Scriptures give us a distant echo, seem to be chiefly affirmations of some of the fundamental doctrines of our faith. The same liturgic strain is discernible in the most godly preaching. Certain sermons, of most intense appeal to human hearers, still read like words of communion with God. Some of Archbishop Leighton's discourses are of this godly cast. Some passages in the sermons of Frederick Robertson are of the same order. This is the most divine ideal of Christian preaching.

(5) In my judgment, some of the marvels recorded of the success of single sermons in the salvation of hearers are due to this exaltation of the work of the preacher into the atmosphere of the Divine Mind. It is God who seems to speak. On the wings of His suggestions, men rise into converse with him. When the Rev. John Livingstone, for instance, was instrumental in the awakening of five hundred hearers by one discourse, I suspect that his preaching was uplifted by the personal godliness of the man into the atmosphere of devotion. He became, for the time, an instrument on which the Spirit of God moved without hindrance.

We are told that "the chariots of God are thousands of angels." Among the mysteries of the divine life, it may be that God does in person move in the persons of his instruments. Their words are first his words; their thoughts his; their persuasions the direct movement of his will; and their work in preaching therefore becomes

his work, and the result of it is his decree. Hence come the miracles of their success. This intensity of personal holiness in the preacher distinguishes the periods of grandest spiritual success in the pulpit. The want of it, specially the opposite to it, is the fatal disease which makes many an able pulpit lifeless.

(6) You are too familiar with these views, to render necessary further enlargement upon them here. Yet, rhetorically considered, this is the root of the whole matter before us. It is no peculiarity of preaching, growing out of the sacredness of the work. It is only a development, in the forms of religious speech, of the fundamental principle of eloquence in all speech. The character is the speech: the man is the speech. That aim at the practical successes of the pulpit which springs from godlikeness of character in the man will often seem to scholarly criticism to be the work, the wisdom, the adroitness, the inspiration of genius, threading its way through the sinuosities of oratorical art. Yet oratorical art is the last thing the man cares for or thinks of.

(7) I have remarked that any thing which deadens a preacher's personal faith in the truths he preaches must tend to create a paralysis of applicatory force equivalent to that which springs from downright unbelief. It deserves to be here noted that this is specially true of the doctrine of retribution. To this doctrine the pulpit sustains a peculiar relation. Not that it is more sharply representative than others of the Christian system: in some respects it is inferior to others in applicatory power. The motive-power derived from it is less profound and less permanent than that derived from the more amiable aspects of our theology. But the peculiarity of the doctrine of retribu-

tion is, that, as related to the ministrations of the pulpit, it stands first in the order of time. As the exponent to a preacher of the state in which the gospel *finds* men, it stands in the forefront of all theology. Other views come to life in a preacher's experience subsequently, which are more far-reaching than this; but this is the alphabet of them all. In their fullness they all depend on this.

I have elsewhere spoken of the quadrilateral of doctrines in Christian theology, each one of which supports the rest; viz., the doctrines of depravity, of atonement, of regeneration, and of retribution. These are the elemental forces in the faith of a preacher. In homiletic use they illustrate, enforce, measure, and intensify each other. The proportions of each define the proportions of the others. The degree of faith which realizes one of them to a preacher's mind will affect his working faith in all the rest. They are all of them elements of an intense theology. Yet, of these four, the doctrine of retribution, indicative as it is of the peril in which the gospel finds men, and being, therefore, the first which naturally realizes itself to the faith of a preacher, will inevitably stand foremost in giving character to his experience of the rest. Lower the tone of his faith in this doctrine, either by secret intellectual doubts, or by moral insensibility, and the rest must sink proportionately. Sooner or later, the whole interior life of the pulpit must be what the preacher's faith is in this one of its elemental forces.

You will find it to be thus in your own homiletic development. The sense of laboring in a great emergency will brood over your pulpit at the very birth of a Christlike experience within you. The gathering and concentration of perils, the ripening of an infinite crisis,

the threatening of an unspeakable woe, the overshadowing of the critical and ultimate exigency of probation, — these are the phases of truth which will first become real to you, and which will measure the intensity of all that comes after in the experience of your mission as a Christian preacher. Let your experience at this point be sterile, and all that follows in the natural order of spiritual growth will be sterile also.

The principle involved in this view explains the fact, and is also strikingly illustrated by the fact, that unbelievers in the doctrine of future punishment are never on any very large scale efficient supporters of Christian missions. Why is this? The reason is simply that they do not believe, as others do, that this is a lost world. Not believing this elementary fact of the situation, they unconsciously lower the whole redemptive work to the level and to the temperature of that negative. On the same principle is it that life dies out of the ministry of an individual who attempts to preach with no heart in his faith in this doctrine, and therefore with no vivid conceptions of his audience as an assembly of lost souls.

(8) This train of thought suggests, further, that the doctrine of retribution, when held as the creed of the head, and not the faith of the heart, tends to create a recoil in the popular mind, proportioned to the intensity of the truth itself. Some truths, by a belief without corresponding sensibility in the believer, are transformed into prodigies of falsehood in the view of sensitive hearers. To the common sense of men, to believe certain dogmas, and not to feel them, is proof incontestable, either that the dogmas themselves are a monstrous delusion, or the believer is a monster in character. Then, inasmuch as the man, in such a case,

is commonly as amiable in his instincts as the average of men, the looker-on takes the other horn of the dilemma, and finds the monster in the dogma.

The faith of the Church is, in its nature, an intense faith. Belief of it tends to create intense character: it evokes intense sensibilities, intense activities, an intense consecration. A cool intellectual acceptance of it, which is only that, is demoniacal. But its believers are not demons. Therefore it is the faith that is wrong; that is a terrific dream. It is a nightmare of ascetic piety, which should command no trust, but abhorrence rather, proportioned to the claims which the falsehood asserts. The more intense it is, the more odious it is, because it is the intensity of a malign creed, which none but a satanic mind could have breathed into life. Such is the instinctive reasoning of men upon such a faith, when it is falsified by the character of the believer. Let that believer be the occupant of the pulpit, and he may create many infidels in the effort to save one. No more fatal catastrophe can overwhelm his ministry than the possession of this creed of the intellect without the faith of the heart.

So overpowering is this drift of the popular logic on the subject, that even the necessary reasonings of good men in defense of their faith are often denounced as malign. It is perilous to put into print the argument for certain doctrines: they need the human voice, eye, tone, gesture, to carry the impression of a faith as distinct from a creed. The frame-work of the doctrine needs to be weighted with the character of the man. For the proof of eternal punishment especially, oral address is superior to the press. Even President Edwards, one of the most saintly of men, is criticised by Matthew Arnold as a man of merciless temperament, because he

has left on record a cool logical defense of the Calvinistic theology. His sermon entitled "Sinners in the hands of an angry God," he could *preach* at Enfield to a crowd of awestruck and broken-hearted listeners; but that sermon in *print* has often been denounced as heartless and malign.

A melancholy illustration of this view, followed by most disastrous consequences, is yet fresh in the ecclesiastical history of New England. In the memoir of the Rev. Dr. Channing, and in certain other memoranda of his life, it is recorded that in his youth he was once taken by his father to hear a celebrated preacher of the orthodox school of theology. The boy was in a state of sensitive religious inquiry. He had naturally an ascetic temperament. In subsequent life he impaired his health by extreme vigils and fasting. On the occasion referred to, he listened in awe to the representation the preacher gave of man's lost state, and his exposure to eternal woe. The only hope held out to him was his helpless dependence on sovereign grace. The sermon seemed to him to throw a pall over the whole world. He left the church in speechless consternation. His soul was panic-struck in dread of what should come next. Who the preacher was, it is not said. He may have been a godly man, who preached in all sincerity the theology of the time. He may have been the Rev. Dr. Hopkins, who was a pastor in Channing's birthplace. But, whoever he was, there was a huge gap between the demonstrative sensibilities of the man, and those of the tender child among his hearers. To the boy the sermon seemed as one of the "rocks and the mountains" that should fall upon a doomed sinner. He waited for his father to speak to him of the ghastly doom before him. They stepped into the carriage, and

rode home in silence. He felt himself to be on the threshold of hell. Presently his father began to whistle, and, on entering the house, he called for his slippers, and sat down to read the newspapers. How natural was the child's notice of the little incidents of the ride and the coming home! Thus he reasoned: "If the fearful tidings I have heard from the eternal world are true, how can a sane man whistle, or think of his slippers, or open a newspaper?" To a child's mind the inference was irresistible: "The fearful dogma is not true. My father does not believe it. Deacon B—— does not believe it. The preacher did not believe it. Nobody believes it, and nobody can." He felt that he had been trifled with. The preacher had tortured his childish ignorance by a theologic bugbear. It may be, that on that memorable afternoon American Unitarianism was born.

I will not pause now to analyze the moral influences there at work; but so much as this is clear, that the youthful hearer of the gospel needed to have such a faith enveloped in the sensibilities of a warm human heart. He needed to receive it from the inmost soul of the preacher, tremulous with desire to save the souls of hearers. He needed to be made to feel that the doctrine of retribution is one which can be held and is held by benignant though awestruck believers. Can you not conceive of a method of bringing that doctrine, and others cognate with it, home to the conscience even of that monastic boy, which should have commanded his trust, and not merely his horror? And, if such had been the fact, who can say that the moral history of thousands might not have been affected benignly by that one sermon to that one child?

We must measure the intense theology of that age,

and the disproportioned development in it of the sterner aspects of our faith, in order to understand Dr Channing's inextinguishable hatred of the Calvinistic theology. As he had received it, it had appeared to bring him and all mankind down to the open gates of hell, and to leave them there. At its bidding he had looked in upon the lake of fire. The only rescue which was made real to his conceptions, and possible to his logic, was to fling the delusion from him as a demoniacal invention. Thus he ever afterwards, in his public ministry, caricatured the orthodox faith. After the experience of his childhood, under the preaching of that age, his intense mind could conceive of it in no other way. The Calvinistic Deity was to him a malign being. Retribution was the anger, the wrath, the fury, the rage of a satanic mind. The Atonement was a device of demoniacal torture. The cross he called the "central scaffold of the universe." We must always expect to find the hostility of profound natures to our faith proportioned to the intrinsic intensity of it, if we permit it to reach them from the pulpit, as a creed of the intellect only, not humanized by the sensibilities of a soul behind it.

(9) Further: it deserves emphatic notice that the spiritual element here claimed as requisite to the preaching of an intense theology can not be successfully imitated. Character in any thing can not be imitated with success in the long run; but nowhere else is a moral counterfeit so sure to be detected as in the pulpit. Even with honest purpose, with desire to save souls, a preacher can not put on the signs of moral earnestness with any reasonable hope that they will beguile the people into subjection to the genuine thing. Not only is it true that God is not mocked, but

Ed. Note: Again, the student is cautioned concerning the leanings of brother Phelps toward the unbiblical precepts of Calvinism. Read this section only for the homiletic teachings in it; not for the theological ones.

the people are not mocked. There is a subtle something which is beyond all art; art can neither imitate it, nor conceal the absence of it.

Science tells us that chemical analysis can reduce a diamond to the same elements as those of charcoal, with such exact similitude, that the difference is less than one fifty-thousandth part of the diamond's weight. Yet never was the chemist born who could create a diamond. So homiletic art may conspire with an honest purpose to do good in imitating the exterior of a godly character in thought, in speech, in action, so exactly, that homiletic criticism can not detect the difference between the original and the copy. Yet the moral instinct of hearers will detect it. Even conscience can not make a godly preacher. The spirit answers only to the spirit. To every thing else souls are dumb.