

LESSON XXXVII.

LECTURE XXXVII.

THE CONCLUSION: INFERENCE AND REMARK, APPEALS, EXCURSUS.

THREE incidental inquiries occur in connection with the topic of the forcibleness of inferences and remarks discussed in the last lecture.

The first is, Ought an inference to be derived from an inference? If one inference has been drawn from the body of the sermon, may a second be added, which is only an inference from the first? The answer should depend on force of connection with the body of the sermon. It is no objection to an inference that it proceeds from a previous inference, provided that it be also forcibly suggested by the discussion. It may be related to the primary inference by logical deduction, and to the discussion as a suggested remark. This complication is not objectionable, nor is it as complicated in practice as in statement.

The second incidental inquiry is, Ought contrast to be tolerated between an inference, or remark, and the body of the sermon? For instance, ought an inference which appeals to fear to be derived, if logical, from a discussion which in the main appeals to hope? Ought a remark addressed to the impenitent to follow a discussion addressed to Christians? In reply, several memoranda deserve mention.

In the first place, contrast in itself considered is a natural mode of suggestion and impression. It does not necessarily impair unity of impression. It may heighten the impression of unity. Contrasted inferences, therefore, may be desirable in conclusions.

Secondly, contrast in an application sometimes has the advantage of creating indirect impression. A discussion which has seemed to aim at the impenitent may, in the conclusion, reach Christians by reflected application, and *vice versa*. "If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" St. Peter uses in this text the unconscious art of antithetic admonition. Men will often listen by stealth to indirect reproofs which they would resent, if given directly. Like Nicodemus, they will seek truth, if they may do so under cover. They will preach to themselves applications which they would repel if thrust upon them. Contrast, therefore, may be desirable as one means of indirect impression.

Thirdly, contrast is not desirable where the material introduced by it is relatively feeble. With all its advantages, contrast involves an interruption of harmony. This is a sacrifice. The object gained, therefore, should be obviously worth the sacrifice. The material should be weighty. Relatively to preceding thought, it should mark increase of intensity. Otherwise the chief impression made will be only that of a jar upon continuity.

Fourthly, contrast is not desirable at the close of a comparatively feeble sermon. No clock always strikes twelve. We all preach some sermons the intellectual constitution of which needs tonics. Discretion must be exercised when we come to the application of such sermons. In the application the strength of a sermon

is put to the test. Contrast in its nature involves violence of change. It is to persuasive discourse what heroic treatment is to medical art. A strong discourse is needed to bear the vigorous working of it. The sermon should have been composed of positive thought, striking truths, vivid representation, resulting in electric impression. A phlegmatic, nerveless, negative, or commonplace sermon—and we all preach some such sermons—is like a frail constitution in a man who belongs to a decaying race. Its feebleness may be overwhelmed by the vigorous handling which contrasted force involves.

Finally, contrast is not natural, when the materials thus introduced can not be speedily dispatched. By prolonged amplification the force of contrast defeats itself. Contrasted impressions depend on transient expression. No art can make stationary lightning impressive. We are sensible of contrast only in glimpses. A contrasted inference, or remark, therefore, should be concisely developed. It may be dense with thought; but it should be rapidly traversed.

From these considerations it appears that contrast in a conclusion may be the best material possible, but that it needs to be selected with care, and developed with force.

The third incidental inquiry is, Ought inferences or remarks to converge, or diverge, in their relation to the discussion? Obviously two methods are possible in constructing this form of conclusion, which may be distinguished as the convergent and the divergent methods. In the one case, the series has a single aim. It bends steadily and cumulatively to one result. In the other, the series is versatile. It branches out luxuriantly. In the one, the application is pointed, like a

thorn: in the other, it expands like a palm-leaf. The question is, Does force of application require its restriction to either of these methods?

I answer, In the first place, concentration is intrinsically more powerful than expansion. Dr. Lyman Beecher used to claim that a sermon should have one, and but one, "burning-point." This is generally rather than universally true. The great majority of evangelical sermons find their natural resultant in some one duty to be done, or one privilege to be accepted, or one sin to be abandoned, or one truth to be believed. Unity is so intense and so compact in all earnest discourse, that it will commonly project itself in the application; so that an obedient hearer goes away with the resolve, "This one thing I do."

But, secondly, the divergent method may exhibit the fruitfulness of a truth in practical results. Much is gained sometimes by disclosing an affluence of practical bearings. "By their fruits ye shall know them." Vine-dressers recommend one grape for its quality, and another for its abundant fruitage. A certain force of application consists in volume rather than in pungency. Conscience surrounded by many monitory hints may be more profoundly moved than if goaded by one.

The divergent method also facilitates variety of application. Respect for truth is awakened, if it is made to appear versatile in its reach, and many-sided in its practical uses. Criticism exalts Shakespeare as the "myriad-minded man." As we respect men who can do many things well, so we revere a truth which seems capacious in its uses.

The divergent method, also, may make one application auxiliary to another. An appeal to one class of hearers, suggested by one inference, is assisted by an

appeal to another class flowing from another inference. Men will bear to be reproved by one application of a sermon, if they see that others are reproved by another. Inferences or remarks may thus work as allies when they do not converge to one point.

To some subjects of discourse the divergent method is a necessity. Some themes are so many-sided that you can not apply them thoroughly in any one line of thought. Condense them to a point, like the flame of a blow-pipe, and you leave unused, it may be, their best resources of practical impression. They flash light at a multitude of angles. They eject heat through innumerable orifices. Therefore they suggest appeal in all directions. For illustration, take such a theme as the justice of God. One powerful application you can make by an inference from it addressed to the fears of men. But you can not thus use exhaustively, or even affluently, the practical resources of that doctrine. You can not thus illustrate its most amiable uses. You must revolve it, show how prolific it is in practical uses, reveal its attractive as well as its repellent virtues, unfold its minute as well as its sublime bearings, make believers love it, as well as make the ungodly fear it. In no other treatment can you develop to the full its applicatory usefulness.

3d, Passing now from these inquiries incidental to the forcibleness of inferences and remarks, I observe a third suggestion respecting their treatment, in the principle that they should be developed without needless formality of statement.

(1) Formality which may be necessary in the body of the discussion should, if possible, be relaxed in the application. The applicatory process must be flexible, its transitions easy, its forms, therefore, as ductile as

may be consistently with perspicuity. Often ease of access to the heart of a hearer may depend on whether you say, "I infer from this subject, seventhly, another application; namely" . . . or, "Again: this subject teaches," etc. So slight a rhetorical difference as the omission of the personal pronoun and the numerical announcement may assist the passage of your thought to the spot where you wish to lodge it, in the sensibilities of the hearer, rather than in his intellect only.

(2) We have the more need of care for this principle, because the inference and remark very easily fall into and under the formality of discussion. Inference, especially, is a logical process. It readily takes on the logical baldness of statement. This is illustrated in the excessive multitude of inferences to which allusion has been made as burdening the sermons of the old English preachers. Flavel has a sermon with twenty-four inferences in the conclusion; another, with fifty-six inferences and remarks. President Edwards has a discourse with twenty-two divisions in the application; another, with thirty-one.

4th, Inferences and remarks should be developed, if possible, by the use of interesting materials.

(1) Barrenness of treatment is nowhere else so great an evil as in an application. Interest elsewhere is of little use, if not sustained here. Interest elsewhere should, if possible, be reduplicated here. Yet some sermons are more interesting everywhere else than here. Some preachers are more inventive, more prolific, more racy, in every other process of sermonizing than in that of applying truth to its practical uses. They explain lucidly, they prove forcibly, they illustrate vividly; but they do not apply truth eloquently. In their applications they never seem fresh.

They give the fruit of jaded minds. The conclusion falls like the dull, chill pattering of a November rain.

(2) Therefore we should never trust to the elaborateness of a discussion alone for the impression of a sermon. That is like trusting to the trunk of an apple-tree for its fruitage. We should never trust to the truthfulness of an inference or remark for its applicatory force. We must interest men in the uses of truth by using it in interesting methods of detail. No art of invention should be despised by a preacher in the effort to throw a spell over an audience by the raciness of closing thoughts and the magnetism of last words.

5th, The necessity of racy materials in this part of a sermon suggests, however, that, in constructing and developing the inference and remark, we should avoid fantastic materials. That is an ill-formed or ill-trained mind which revels in eccentric applications. Odd laws of suggestion are weak in practical results. Inferences are vapid if extorted rather than derived from a subject. Remarks are apt to be irrelevant if foisted into conclusions. Such conclusions seem scatter-brained. The credit of a sterling truth is sacrificed by the substitution of conceit for sense.

In nothing is the weakness of eccentric work more obvious than in the practical part of the business of the pulpit. It may interest, it may stimulate, it may, therefore, gain a hearing; but it seldom develops that sensible and solemn aim at results which is essential to practical force. Above all other intellectual qualities in practical affairs, men prize good sense. They crave to be sensibly appealed to. They demand to be treated like men of sense and by men of sense. No other opinions are so weak as those which are crotchets.

Hence it is that genius so often more than balances

its good work by the evil of its vagaries. Good sense, on the contrary, has, in kind, the momentum of the planets. Its every movement is power, and with no drawback from waste of force. Here lies the strength of the great bulk of the Christian ministry, not in cultivating or imitating the coruscations of genius, not in stimulating or assuming theatrical arts, but in the planetary working of common sense. This is a power which, as Wordsworth says, "has great allies." Time is its invincible auxiliary. All social forces second it with the certainty and the reach of gravitation. Nothing else gives such power of command; nothing else wears with such durability.

It deserves to be recorded that fantastic uses of preaching were the chief cause of the degradation of the English pulpit which Macaulay so vividly portrays in his narrative of the state of the rural pulpits of England at the time of the Restoration.

X. The tenth and last general topic relating to conclusions is the inquiry, How should appeals be conducted?

1st, Appeals should be founded on the strongest materials which the sermon contains.

(1) An appeal is intrinsically the most intense form of speech to a hearer. It needs, therefore, to be supported by intense materials of thought. The single burning-point of the discourse, if it has one, should be the point from which exhortation grows. If appeal is made from more than one point, they should be the strong points of thought. Never build an appeal on petty items, never on things incidental to the main channel of discussion, never on an anecdote, unless it is illustrative of the central ideas of the sermon.

(2) Discourse should, therefore, be so shaped as to

bring the strongest material to the front in the conclusion, so that it can be naturally used as the basis of appeal. Appeal drawn from a closing division is natural only when that division offers a climax or a concentration of the truth discussed.

(3) The weakness of a sermon is often disclosed by the fact that at the end no other than pettifogging appeal is possible. Imagine a sermon on "The Vestments of the Clergy," "Genuflexions in Prayer," "The Marriage of a Deceased Wife's Sister," "A Temporary Diaconate." Would not the intrinsic feebleness of such sermons, as growing out of the insignificance of their themes, be betrayed if an attempt were made to close them with hortatory applications? Yet similar to these in principle is any conclusion in which the weighty materials of the sermon are overlooked, and the closing appeal is grafted upon a fragment or an anecdote. In one instance, an exhortation to promptness in attendance on divine worship followed a sermon on divine omnipresence. In another, an appeal on the duties of the choir followed a discourse on the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Absolute irrelevance to all parts of the discussion may not have been the defect in either case; but relevance only to incidental or fragmentary materials must have been the defect in both.

Appeal expresses the soul of the sermon, the very *ψυχή* of oratorical discourse, as no other feature of it can in equal degree. The organic life of it ought to pulsate there. Therefore the most powerful of resources should there be put to use.

2d, Appeals should be aimed at feelings as distinct from convictions. It is one thing that a hearer should believe that he ought to feel: it is a very different thing

that he does feel. Therefore to produce the conviction is not necessarily to produce the feeling.

(1) These two things mark the chief distinction between two classes of preachers. One will make an audience believe that they ought to be moved, that they are profoundly guilty for not being moved, that their insensibility is the extreme of depravity; yet they are not moved below the surface of the conviction of sin in being what they are. Another, without uttering a word upon the solemn character of the truth, the obligation to feel it, the sin of indifference to it, will so use it, and so appeal on the strength of it, as to take possession of the hearer's sensibilities, either by storm or by insinuation, so that tremulous and obedient emotion shall be responding to the truth before he is aware of it.

(2) Appeals to convictions, as distinct from the feelings, are very apt to express themselves largely in an exclamatory style. "Oh my hearers, how solemn is this truth!" "What responsibilities we sustain!" "How deeply we ought to feel in view of them!" "What gratitude should swell our hearts!" "How fearful is the guilt of deadness under the sound of the gospel!" "Oh that divine grace may melt our obdurate souls!" and so on. I do not say that appeal should never take this form. It may rarely be the legitimate object of a sermon to show to hearers that they *have* stolid sensibilities. Then such appeals, so far as they go, are pertinent. They are forcible just to the extent of the thought expressed by them, no further. The emotive drapery of style, beyond that, goes for nothing.

The most powerful preacher that I ever heard in appeals to the emotive nature never in my hearing resorted to the exclamatory drapery. The resources of

his appeals were his facts, his principles, his doctrines, his arguments, his cumulations of solid thought. These he so manipulated that they made their own appeal. Silent emanations from them were going forth through the whole discussion, which softened the feelings, and won the affections, and gave them an object to grasp, and prepared them to respond with reduplicated volume to the few unimpassioned words of hortation at the close. There was no need of an appeal to the conscience. That outwork was carried long before.

Such conquest of the sensibilities by the force of plain truth is often forestalled and forbidden by appeals of which the point is not feeling itself, but the obligation to feel. Philosophically regarded, no more sure bar to right feeling can be created than the assault upon conscience alone and in isolation from other faculties. Introvers turn a man's mind upon himself in the act of soliloquy, — "I ought to feel, I ought to love, to mourn, to hate," — and that very introspection forbids all feeling except the sense of duty.

(3) Appeal to conscience alone, if successful, is by virtue of its success failure. A moral nature, indurated in all respects except that of a quickened conscience, if the proper objects of right feeling are present, is depravity consolidated. Like a suspension-bridge, which is strongest when the heaviest weight it will bear is upon it, the guilt of a soul is most hopelessly consolidated under the burden of aroused conscience, if, with the objects of other feeling in mind, nothing else is aroused. But, if the legitimate objects of holy feeling are not present in thought, the torpid mind is only a philosophical necessity.

3d, Appeals should be aimed ultimately at the executive faculty of the soul.

(1) If appeal should not rest with conscience alone, neither should it rest with any emotive quickening. The doing of something is the end which we strive to reach through the emotive nature as the natural avenue of approach. To arouse emotion, therefore, and stop there, is as unphilosophical as it is to address truth to the intellect only, and pause with that. If the doing of something is not always expressed in a naturally framed appeal, it is always implied.

(2) In this consists the chief difference between hortation in the pulpit and the scenic impression of the stage. Theatric passion ends with itself. Homiletic appeal aims at an execution of something beyond the emotive excitement. "What will you do about it?" is a question which the pulpit always asks, the stage never. Appeals, therefore, should always be constructed with fidelity to this distinction. They should never fall into the theatrical vein, never play upon the emotions as the end of discourse, never rest with working up a given heat of feeling, never pause with success in making tears flow.

(3) Hearers need sometimes to be made to see that their religious emotions are melodramatic. Emotive luxury sometimes needs to be checked in an audience by putting the question plainly to each one, "What will you do about it?" The sympathies of a crowd in the street, who were giving vent to abundant exclamations of pity for a blind man who had been run over, were suddenly brought to their genuine level by the inquiry of one of the crowd, "How much do you pity him in your pockets?" So the emotions of an assembly of worshippers often need to be brought, by an appeal, to the test of executive action. Did you ever observe how quickly the tears of an audience are dried

by the passing of the contribution-box? The executive test of feeling is sure to put a stop to its effervescent indulgence. The deeper reach of feeling penetrates below the level of words and tears to that of deeds.

4th, Appeals should be kept true in their aim to the vital acts of religious duty. It has been remarked that appeals should be supported by the strong points of religious truth, also that intrinsically they are the most intense form of religious discourse, that they are the acme of persuasive speech. In keeping with this, the dignity of appeals should be sustained in the acts at which they are aimed; they should urge the vital duties of a religious life. They should press upon hearers the things most essential to salvation; they should persuade men to the discharge of the most critical obligations. To expend the force of such intense forms of speech derived from most weighty resources of truth upon insignificant affairs is an incongruity and a waste. The dignity of religious hortation is degraded, if laid out upon things not vital and decisive.

This suggests an *excursus* on the danger, in revivals of religion, of exalting unduly acts of the impenitent which fall short of the scriptural conditions of salvation. Much is often said, in conducting revivals, of persuading men to "commit themselves." The impenitent are often exhorted to pray, to read the Scriptures, to ask the prayers of others, to observe hours of religious meditation, to attend meetings of religious inquiry. These duties are sometimes urged upon children of tender age. The more public these secondary acts are, the more positive is thought to be the "committal" of the inquirer to something which stands as the equivalent of a religious life. Hence, if he can be induced to let his voice be heard in a Christian assembly, or to take

a seat assigned to religious inquirers, or to append his name to a religious covenant, he is regarded as being in a hopeful state. Under the pressure of sympathetic excitement these acts of self-committal are often made to appear, especially to unthinking youth, as the vital duties of the hour. Is this a wise policy in conducting revivals of religion? The question is often a very perplexing one, on which Christian zeal and Christian wisdom are not agreed. In answer to it the following things deserve consideration.

(1) To defend this policy is much more grateful to Christian feeling than to oppose it. In itself it is plausible. At the first view it seems harmless. In our own day it is often the policy of the most earnest and spiritual portion of a church. On the other hand, it is often opposed by the ultra-conservative, the worldly, the formal, the silent membership, by those who are satisfied with other successes than that of winning souls to Christ. A pastor sometimes finds himself between these two fires in respect to this method of conducting a revival of religion. On the one side is all, or nearly all, the Christian enterprise of the church, and on the other are all, or nearly all, the dead-weights upon Christian progress. Under such conditions it is much easier to adopt the policy in question than it is to create a wiser one, if there be such.

(2) But, looking at the question in its intrinsic merits, the fact is a very significant one that impenitent men are never exhorted in the Scriptures to any thing preliminary to repentance. But one thing is the center of all biblical appeal to the ungodly; that is repentance and faith,—a complex yet a single act. Nothing short of this is deemed worthy of mention by inspired preachers to the unconverted. “Repent, believe;” “believe,

repent;" "turn ye;" "obey;" "cease to do evil;" "take up thy cross;" "follow me:" in varied phrase, the one thing is the only thing on which the attention of the awakened conscience is riveted in biblical persuasion of the impenitent. Biblical hortation never even directs men to pray, except as an act of Christian faith. Impenitent prayer is never named in the Scriptures but as an object of divine abhorrence. This fact has great significance as a representative fact: it fairly and indubitably illustrates apostolic policy in the conduct of revivals.

(3) In the nature of things there are no impenitent acts auxiliary to repentance. Nothing commits a sinner to a religious life but religious living: nothing binds him to repentance but repenting. One and but one thing is the thing to be done; nothing else takes the place of it; nothing else assists it; nothing else approaches it, the soul remaining impenitent. Impenitent prayer is blasphemy. As the subject of religious obligation and religious motive, an impenitent soul is at a dead-lock until impenitence ceases.

(4) Yet human nature unregenerate is prone to acts of religious substitution under the goading of an angry conscience. Condemned in this thing, condemned in that thing, condemned in every thing but in the one thing which alone can set him right with God, an awakened sinner often feels it to be an immense relief if he may even temporarily persuade himself that there is any thing else than repentance which he can do, which shall have in it the semblance of good. Reined back by retributive conscience from every thing that he will do, impelled by the Holy Spirit towards the only thing which he will not do, and crowded on all sides by penal forebodings, he gains time for consolidated resolve in

sin, if he may but be permitted to contemplate as a duty any thing that falls short of that one thing, which for him, in the moral crisis which is upon him, monopolizes all duty. The whole history of religious formalism is a record of such substitutions under the pressure of an indignant conscience. Religious formalism may be as intense and as self-delusive in taking an "anxious-seat" as in attending "high mass."

(5) It is remarkable that a certain class of revivalists who have rebuked this abuse in an ancient form should so often have reproduced it in modern forms. The time was, when awakened men were exhorted by preachers and other Christian workers to pray, and read the Bible, and seek religious counsel, and thus, as it was called in the theologic dialect of the time, "use the means of regeneration." Later theologians have detected and routed that form of substituting for repentance acts which are not repentance; but by exhortations to take the "anxious-seat," and to rise for prayer, and to attend meetings for inquirers, they have often created another class of precisely the same sort of substitutions, by which men have been allowed to regard as duties things which fall equally short of God's requirement.

(6) The sympathetic excitement of a revival may assist the self-confusion of an impenitent mind as to the real aim of God's command. Lord Macaulay says that every large collection of human beings, however well educated, has a strong tendency to become a mob. The religious excitement of multitudes does not protect them from this drift of human nature. If solitude in religious awakening has its perils, so has companionship. Sympathy in itself is a blind instinct. Numbers aroused to high enthusiasm tend to act upon unrea-

soning impulses. Therefore, under such impulses, the commands of God are easily displaced and obscured in the impenitent mind. Impenitent youth especially, who have no religious experience and little self-knowledge to protect them, are easily beguiled, under such conditions, into substitutions of the less for the greater in crises of their history in which the greater is the only thing, and the less is nothing.

(7) Great care is needed, therefore, in revivals of religion, to guard men against deceptive substitutions. These subsidiary acts, in whatever sort the temper of the age may originate them, need to be handled cautiously. I do not say that they should never be allowed; in themselves they may be innocent; but the wise policy is to make little of them. Do not emphasize them by crowding men to them, nor, on the contrary, emphasize them by violent opposition to them. Do not swing a flail to crush a pepper-corn. Treat these acts, done or not done, as trivialities. Exalt above them that which has a decisive religious meaning. Keep in the foreground of popular thought the one elective act by which the soul chooses God. **Treat every thing else as relatively of no moment.**