LESSON XXIX.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

BY

AUSTIN PHELPS, D.D.

LATE BARTLET PROFESSOR OF SACRED RHETORIC IN ANDOVER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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LECTURE XXIX.

THE DIVISION: FORM, ORDER, ANNOUNCEMENT.

6TH, The forms of divisions again demand our attention for the sake of a sixth principle; namely, that divisions should be so stated as to foster expectation in the hearer.

(1) This may be done by avoiding needless commonplace in the forms of divisions. The common stock of thought in the pulpit has modes of statement which use has worn out. The more solemn the thought, the more threadbare it often is in its ancient forms. To change the figure, the utterance of such a thought in such a form is an opiate: it is either nauseating or soporific. Seek fresh expression for such materials: revolve them in mind till you can frame less hackneyed statements which shall still be natural and clear. You thus stimulate attention by quickening expectation. "The value of the soul" was in our Lord's time no novelty to human thought. To the Jewish mind it certainly was as old as the time of the great Law-giver. It must have had time-worn forms of expression inherited from the prophets. It was our Saviour's mission to give it a new life, and to deepen the sense of its reality. How did he do this? He achieved it, in part, by inventing an entirely novel way of putting it in familiar discourse: "What shall a man give in exchange

for his soul?" That man possesses in his spiritual nature a treasure distinct from all others, which he subjects to barter for material joys, has been the theme of thousands of Christian sermons; but that way of putting the case was, so far as we know, original with the mind of Christ. We do not know that preacher, or prophet, or poet, or philosopher, ever invented that contrast of thought before he gave it.

How many such resurrections of old and dormant and dying thoughts our Saviour accomplished by his spiritual inventiveness, who can say? Yet this was no inimitable virtue in his preaching. A preacher has only to put his thought to himself in such a way that it touches him to the quick, and he can not help putting it to hearers in some form the piquancy of which gives it the force of an original. Grasp the handle of an electric battery fully charged, and the bystanders will know what you find there as soon as you do. So, penetrate any theme of discourse profoundly enough to be yourself electrified by it, and the electric expression of it to others comes with the electric thrill in you.

(2) Expectation may be fostered by the concealment of the conclusion in the forms of divisions. Never hint, before the time, whether you intend to appeal to a hearer's judgment in the conclusion, or to his sensibilities. By all natural arts keep the conclusion secret. Emerson writes, "Beware of the man who *says* 'I am on the eve of a revelation.'" Hearers always suspect a speaker who foretells much of what he is going to do. The doing of it they welcome in the time of it; but the promise to do they elude. One of the evils of announcing a synopsis of the sermon at the beginning is that it foretells too much. It hints at conclusions, often reveals them outright. Expectation is cloyed. It is

unfortunate when a preacher says, in announcing the last division of a sermon, "Before proceeding to apply this subject, let us remark," etc. Why hint that the subject is to be applied? A wiser expedient, often, is to have no application, in order to break up the monotony in the hearer's mind of the inevitable appeal. At the least, we should not remind him of that of which the chief peril is that he will foreknow it, and therefore will be forewarned against it. Suspense respecting the conclusion is not painful to a hearer. If the subject interests him, the suspense intensifies the interest.

(3) Expectation may be fostered by the negative method of discussion. A series of divisions shows that the truth is not this, is not that, is not the other. What is the rhetorical effect of this method? It is to excite curiosity to know what the truth is. A coming negative first suggests that the affirmative is to follow.

(4) Expectation may be cherished by the interrogative forms of division. A question is a prospective statement of a thought: it gives promise of an unknown answer: it is the forerunner of an invisible guest. To every alert mind it is welcome. Sometimes, therefore, an entire series of divisions thrown into the form of interrogatives will be a succession of stimulants to the expectant mood. Interrogative statements of emphatic truths are a striking feature in our Saviour's preaching. Socrates by his example has given it a name. Such interrogatives draw a hearer into a discussion by the sheer attraction of curiosity to see what is to come next.

(5) Expectation is stimulated by a certain indefiniteness of form in the statement of divisions. English style has an idiom, of which I have just given an example unconsciously. I spoke of "a certain indefiniteness of form." This idiom is designed to express two things,

— certainty of thought, with indefiniteness of expression. A something is hinted at as existing in the mind of the speaker, and well known to him; but the full expression of it is held in reserve. In the use of this idiom we mean both to define and to reserve our thought. We give a glimpse of it, and promise more. The form of statement is suggestive: it is a tacit prediction of more than it expresses. This form of statement is admissible in the divisions of sermons. Instead of disclosing the entire outline of the thing which you are about to develop, you hint at it as "a certain thing," — certain to you the speaker, not yet disclosed to the hearer. If this seems to be a refinement of speculative criticism, I reply that it is such only in the seeming. The oratorical instinct frequently resorts to it in practice, without consciousness of doing so. The secret charm which invites that oratorical instinct to it is the stimulus which it applies to the mood of expectation.

7th, A seventh principle is that in different discourses divisions should be constructed with diversity of form. The best forms become hackneyed by use. Genius itself would become the synonym of dullness if it worked a treadmill. An intelligent lady writes to me as follows of her young pastor who has just been dismissed: "He was a kind of machine. Clay went in on one side, and bricks ready-made came out on the other. Every Sunday he brought us a fresh brick. It was impossible not to love him for his finely-disciplined mind, and his handsome face, and his tender, spiritual tone; but his sermons were — dreadful! 'Oh!' I thought, 'if he would but have had a brick one-sided, or too big, or too little, or slack-baked, or burnt, or imprinted with his own fingers, what a joy it would be!' There was a relief when the next minister came, and gave us chips and sawdust."

What was the trouble with this handsome pastor? It may have been a want of fertility of mind; but probably not, for he was a diligent student. The *desid eratum* in his sermons was more likely to be a variety, not in their materials, but in their construction. Sermons are not bricks: they should not be made in one mould, and piled one on another with trowel and plumb-line. The intrinsic demands of thought, if obeyed, necessitate variety. Truth puts a premium on variety, because in no other way can she obtain self-expression.

V. The fifth general topic in the treatment of divisions is that of their order. What is the natural order of thought? If we take into consideration the subject, its discussion, its aim, its relation to the hearers, it is obvious that the natural order of thought must be variable. Much must be left to the homiletic instinct in the selection. The most that criticism can do is to point out the chief varieties of order by which divisions may be arranged. Each will be seen to involve a distinct principle of arrangement.

1st, Divisions may be arranged by an order of logical necessity. Some materials of discussion must from their very nature precede other materials. Some thoughts have no logical force till others have prepared the way for them. Some divisions, therefore, are founded upon other divisions; and the foundations must be first constructed. If you discuss in the same sermon the nature of a doctrine and the proof of that doctrine, the divisions explanatory of its nature must precede those advanced in evidence. You can not naturally prove a thing till you know and have affirmed what the thing is. In such cases the order of discourse is evidently imperative. We can not depart from it: we can not vary it: we can scarcely mistake it.

Oratorical instinct adopts it almost involuntarily. It is the order of logical necessity.

2d, Divisions may be arranged in an order founded on the relation between cause and effect. You propose to discuss the causes and the consequences of a moral phenomenon in the same sermon. Which shall take precedence in the order of discourse? The order of creation is not necessarily the natural order of discussion. It may be best to advance from effect to cause. Divine providence reasons with men mainly by that order. No rule, therefore, can be given, as between cause and effect, determining which shall take the precedence. We can only recognize the principle of order as founded on the relation between these two things, and recognize, also, that the order is reversible.

3d, Divisions may be arranged in an order founded on the relation between genus and species. This, again, is a specimen of a reversible order. Not invariably must the genus be first considered. The order of discovery is generally from species to genus. So may be that of popular discourse. Cumulative impression may demand this order, yet a different purpose might require the reverse order. Criticism can only recognize the order and its reversibility.

4th, Divisions may be arranged in the order of intrinsic dignity. Oratorical instinct outruns criticism in approving the value of (if I may coin a much needed word) a *climactic* procession of thought. Intuitively in discourse we begin with the less, and end with the greater. Power of impression depends largely on rise of impression. What possible sense of order in thought could have directed Neal, in his history of the Puritans, when he described Bernard Gilpin in the following language? — "He was a

heavenly-minded man, of a large and generous soul, of a tall stature of body, with a Roman nose, and his clothes were neat." Could the historian more perfectly have justified De Quincey's famous caricature of climax? — "If a man indulges himself in murder, he very soon comes to think little of robbery, and from robbing he comes to drinking, and from that to incivility and procrastination."

Sometimes, however, it is an open question which of two divisions is the superior. In the defense of Professor Webster, his counsel adopted as nearly as possible the same order that Cicero did in the defense of Milo. Whether consciously or not, I do not know; but the imitation was remarkable. He argued: 1. That Professor Webster did not kill Dr. Parkman; 2. That, if he did, he committed justifiable homicide. Then, after a recess, he returned to the point first discussed, — the denial of the deed. Members of the bar in Boston were divided in opinion as to the wisdom of this order. Some contended that it indicated a wavering of conviction on the part of the counsel; that the division claiming that he did not commit the deed should have been reserved wholly for the close of the discussion. A very grave question, in that case, depended on the order of the argument. So, in preaching, the force of a sermon may demand a delicate discrimination in determining what is the order of dignity. In intrinsic dignity that truth is the most weighty which will carry the most weight over to the object of discourse.

5th, Divisions may be arranged in an order suggested by psychological analysis. A large class of the materials of the pulpit group themselves around the faculties given by the analysis of the mind. For instance, we should naturally argue man's duty: 1. To acquaint

himself with the Scriptures; 2. To yield his heart to their control; 3. To obey their precepts in his life. "Psychological" is a profound word to apply to these divisions. No hearer will think of them as such; no wise preacher will call them such in the pulpit: but they are such. Intellect, feeling, and will lie at the basis of the division. The oratorical instinct often adopts this order in the pulpit, even when unconscious of any metaphysical design. This is also one of the reversible orders. We can not always preach in the psychological groove, beginning with the intellect, and ending with the will. The opposite order may be necessary to the purpose of the sermon. All that criticism can say, therefore, is that this is an order founded on the psychological analysis. From which end the order shall proceed must depend on the aim of the discourse, and will commonly be decided, not by a deliberate, but by a spontaneous, decision of the rhetorical instinct.

6th, Divisions may be arranged in an order of time. Events in historical order, biography in chronological order, hypotheses in the order of probable occurrence are illustrations of this. Experience as actually lived lies at the foundation of a multitude of sermons.

7th, Divisions may be arranged in an order founded on weight of argument. This will commonly coincide with the order of intrinsic dignity. Like that, the order of argument should be climactic, — the weakest argument first, the unanswerable argument last. Positive argument naturally follows negative argument. Probable argument follows presumptive argument. Conclusive argument follows proximate argument. If an argument is relatively weak, be it so; let it be seen to be so; call it so, if you please. More is gained by

candor than by logical legerdemain. Inform an audience just how much an argument is worth, just how far it carries you towards your conclusion, and claim no more for it; and you command their assent both to your logic and to your candor. One argument, if true, is as good as another, so far as it goes. Weight is weight. The small weight, if gained honestly, is as respectable as a large one.

"I want good solid arguments at first sight," says Montaigne. Very true; and the pulpit should use no other than good arguments and solid. But if, of solid arguments, one is less weighty than another, why should we cheat in the weight by concealing the inferiority? Let it stand at the beginning: claim for it only what it is: let it seem to be what presumption is to demonstration. So decides intuitive logic.

8th, Divisions may be arranged in an order dependent on progress in the personal interest of hearers. One of the chief aims of preaching is to individualize hearers, and to bring truth home to each man's personality. Hence the order perhaps most frequently adopted by a keen homiletic instinct is that of progress in stimulating individual interest.

The following plan of discourse, once presented in this place, will illustrate this. Upon the subject of "The claims of foreign missions upon the Church," the divisions are as follows. Foreign missions are essential: 1. To the fulfillment of the purposes of God; 2. To the salvation of the heathen world; 3. To the development of the Church in Christian lands; 4. To certain special benefits to the churches of our own land; 5. To symmetry of religious growth in every Christian soul. In this order the advance is from the remote to the near, from the truth of infinite range to the truth of present con

sciousness. The thought moves like a ball in a spiral groove, which conducts it by narrowing circuits to a point at the center.

Such are the most important varieties of order in the arrangement of divisions. They suggest three additional remarks.

(1) Varieties of order will sometimes coincide. Two or more may be applicable to the same materials of discourse.

(2) Varieties of order will frequently conflict with each other. The aim of one may defeat the aim of another. The order of time may be the reverse of that of progressive individual interest. The order of psychological analysis is often reversed by the order of experience. The following plan will illustrate this. From the proposition, "The effects of sin on the human soul," the divisions are, the effects of sin: 1. On the human intellect; 2. On the human affection; 3. On the human will. Such was a plan once offered here for criticism! In the light of mental science it seemed philosophical. It was complete and symmetrical. What was the defect? The critic claimed, and justly, that the case was one in which the order of experience in time superseded all other principles of arrangement. In actual experience sin does not commence its ravages in the intellect. No sin exists till the will is corrupted. The order of the sermon, therefore, the materials remaining unchanged, should have been reversed. A more powerful impression may be produced by following the line of experience, and showing, first, that the will is perverted, and for good uses debilitated; then, that the sensibilities are corrupted, and for holy objects deadened; and finally, that the poison of sin is so virulent, that even the intellect

becomes degenerated, and for its loftiest purposes blinded. Thus moral perception is distorted, opinions are refracted from pure truth; then the entire moral being deteriorates under the infection, and integrity of belief ceases.

(3) Various as the several orders of division are, the object aimed at in them is always the same. It is progress in intensity of moral impression. The order which best promotes this is in any given case the superlative order. Follow that order, and you can not go wrong. End with that for which the hearer's need of the discourse is the most imperative. Final impressions should be intrinsically and relatively the most vital of all impressions.

VI. The last general topic to be considered is that of the mode of announcing divisions. This concerns chiefly two things, the use of numerical announcements, and the use of other prefatory words. By either method the chief objects of the announcement are three, — intelligibility, congruity with the feelings of the hearer, and permanence in the memory of the hearer. With these objects in view we readily see the propriety of certain principles which are flexible in their application.

1st, Divisions should be so announced that transition shall be distinctly perceptible. Must numerical forms, then, always be used? Certainly not. Transition can often be made distinct by the use of such prefatory words as "again," "further," "moreover," "once more," "finally." The object is to call attention to the fact of transition. Whatever does that announces a division sufficiently. May numerical forms, then, always be omitted? Certainly not. Some discussions require them. Transitions must often be emphasized in order to be observed. Colloquial usage em-

ploys the numerical forms freely. The common people, expressing serious thought, or offering arguments, instinctively resort to numbers. Sometimes they will assist the numerical announcements by count upon the fingers. To illiterate hearers, the numerals are of special value in quickening attention to the fact of transition, and in assisting them to follow discourse more elaborate than any which they could originate.

2d, Divisions should be so announced as to preserve congruity with the nature of the materials. "In the third place I exhort you;" "In the fifth place I entreat you:" what is the cause of rhetorical friction here? It is a want of congruity between emotive materials and the severest of logical forms. Numerals are adapted to explanatory and argumentative divisions. They are germane to intricate trains of thought. For hortatory, and often for illustrative materials, the less formal preface is sufficient, and therefore the more becoming.

3d, Divisions should be so announced as not to be confounded with each other. General divisions and subdivisions are often thus confounded. If both are introduced numerically, it is difficult in oral address to avoid confusion. A good general rule, therefore, is to number your general divisions only, and announce your subdivisions by the less formal method. Usually this will be congruous with the nature of your materials.

4th, Divisions should not be needlessly announced by a preliminary synopsis at the beginning of the discussion. We have already noticed this as often a needless form of the proposition. But frequently it is a more needless appendage to the proposition. The subject is formally announced, and then the entire outline

of the discussion is proclaimed. In very rare cases this may be a necessity. It marks the extreme of all possible form: it ought to indicate the extreme of difficulty in following the line of thought. Otherwise it is a dead weight of form which the hearer's memory must lift and carry. De Quincey, speaking of a peculiarity of Paganism, says, "Under this original peculiarity of Paganism there arose two consequences, which I shall mark by the Greek letters α and β. The latter I shall notice in their order, first calling attention to the consequence marked α, which is this, etc." You feel at once that ease is here sacrificed to form, and needlessly. The artist is obtruding upon us the tools of his workshop. Yet the forms of the pulpit are sometimes as excessive and superfluous. We have few such preachers as Dr. Emmons, and still fewer such audiences as that of the old church in Franklin fifty years ago. Yet even in Emmons's works I am unable to find more than two or three sermons in which this pre-announcement of the divisions is demanded by the character of the materials.

5th, Divisions should be so announced as not to disclose prematurely the character of the conclusion. A conclusion may be foretold, not only by the substance of the divisions, not only by their form, but also by their prefatory announcements. The Rev. Albert Barnes has a discourse, the five divisions of which are all pre-announced; and then is interpolated this declaration: "The first three of these topics I shall treat by way of illustration, and the last two in the way of inference and remark." In this declaration the preacher soliloquizes. He thus maps out the discussion for his own convenience. The discussion contains nothing which needs any such forewarning for the use of the

hearers. The disclosure of the conclusion especially is premature. Whatever else must be foretold, the character of the application should never be revealed till the moment of its instant use.

6th, Divisions should be so announced as not to deceive an audience respecting the destined length of the discourse. Never express or hint at false promises of brevity. Do not announce "a brief notice" of a division which drags itself out voluminously. Do not promise "only to hint at" a thought which you proceed to exhaust. Do not ask leave "to add a word or two" which swell into a harangue. Do not declare that you will state an inference "without remark," and then add an appeal. Then, having done all these things, do not apologize for the feebleness of your discussion on the ground of "want of time."

A preacher is under obligations of honor to his audience in this thing. He is master of the field. His hearers are helpless under the imposition of his flux of words, through which they peer in vain for the end. They can not rise and rebuke him for his prolixity. A boy crunching peanuts in Faneuil Hall has more liberty to silence a political speaker on the platform than a judge of the Supreme Court has in a church to silence a driveling preacher. Such breaches of good faith are often committed in the use of the prefatory words of concluding divisions. A preacher says "lastly," and "finally," and "once more," and "yet one thought, and I have done." Two, three, even four such consolatory glimpses of the end I have known to be given in succession; and once three such harbingers of rest were followed by a promise, which shrewd hearers were by that time too impatient to believe, that the subject should "be brought to a close by a *few* remarks." "Fi-

nally" is a very precious word to an audience. Hearers often watch for it as they that watch for the morning. Sometimes the more thrilling the sermon, the more welcome is its close. There is a weariness of excitement as well as of *ennui*. The most popular quality of preaching is brevity. If a sermon does not possess it, do not exasperate an audience by promising it.

In closing this discussion of divisions, let me express the conviction that strength in preaching depends on no other rhetorical excellence so much as on good divisions and propositions; that is, on good planning of thought. Cultivate the faculty of strong, compact, finished planning. Study critically the plans of your own discourses. Rewrite your best sermons rather than your poorest, if, by so doing, you can improve the substance, or the forms, or the order of their outline. A skeleton is not a thing of beauty; but it is the thing which, more than any other, makes a body erect and strong and swift. John Quincy Adams says that "divisions belong to the art of thinking." They are fundamental, then, to the art of uttering thought. To the same purpose is the old Roman proverb, ***Qui bene distinguit, bene docet.***