LESSON XXV.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

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LECTURE XXV.

THE PROPOSITION: BREVITY, SPECIFICNESS, ELEGANCE, ITS PREFACE.

(2) PASSING now from simplicity in propositions, let us observe a second principle affecting their qualities; namely, that a proposition should be as brief as it may be, consistently with clearness. A French critic says that "genuine depth comes from concentrated ideas." So of propositions: the deepest, the truest, the most magnetic are susceptible of compactness in form.

In the first place, propositions are often expanded by needless synonyms. "The willfulness and perverseness of sin" is one of Dr. Payson's propositions. "The danger of obstinate and willful disobedience" is a theme proposed by Simeon. "The nature and design of a Christian Church" is a subject of one of Dr. Lathrop's sermons. What is the evil of these couples of words? They dilute the thought beyond the demand of perspicuity. Beyond this demand, words are a solvent of thought. The more, the weaker. We judge thought by weight, not by bulk. Again: needless synonyms may excite false expectations of the range of a discussion. "The willfulness and perverseness of sin" suggests, does it not, a double aim; yet the discussion has but one. From the nature of the case no words employed in a proposition can be

unimportant. Theoretically every word is emphatic. Practically every word will attract attention. With no theory of criticism on the subject, hearers will by instinct take every word as meaning something which can not be spared. Before using a word, therefore, in a proposition, find a use for it.

In the second place, we notice that the objections are similar to the expansion of propositions by needless epithets. "Man's proud contempt of God" is one of Simeon's subjects. What is the force of the epithet? What weight does it carry? Can contempt of God be otherwise than proud? Does the preacher mean to discuss different kinds of sinful contempt? If not, what is the purpose of the epithet? On the contrary, does not a nice discernment of good taste see a force in the substantive alone, from which the epithet makes a positive deduction? "Contempt of God" expresses more than "proud contempt of God." Compression itself gives force to thought, as it does to a bullet. Epithets, nevertheless, are sometimes necessary to strengthen a proposition. The vast majority of epithets used in propositions are designed to produce this intensive effect. Preachers employ them in the involuntary effort to intensify thought. The practical question, therefore, is when to use them, and when not. The discrimination of the preacher must answer. This may be assisted by observing three principles.

One is, that, if accuracy of statement requires an epithet, it is a necessity. Unqualified, the proposition may be untrue. Another principle is, that, if an epithet contains the characteristic idea of the sermon, it becomes a necessity to the proposition. "The greatest of these is charity;" — from this text, a sermon was once preached on "the incomparable excellence of love."

Why was the epithet necessary? Because it contained the distinctive idea of the whole discussion. Such epithets are condensed sentences. They are the discourses in miniature. A third principle is that the proposition is not the place in which to intensify a subject merely for rhetorical impression. To do that may be the design of the development or of the conclusion; but the purposes of mere statement limit the aim of the proposition. "The horrible guilt of those who strengthen the hands of the wicked;" "The awful doom of the finally impenitent;" "The glorious rewards of the righteous,"—do you not perceive, that, in these examples, the epithets have no definitive value? They are inserted only to magnify the idea. The accuracy of the statement does not demand them, nor is the characteristic thought of the proposition in any one of them. They are like the lens of a magic-lantern, — inserted only to augment the diagram behind. The use of them indicates the straining of style to express on the instant and at first sight that which it is the province of the discussion to develop as an ultimate result. They put the whole structure out of true perspective.

Again: propositions may be needlessly expanded by circuitous or indolent grammatical constructions. Which of the two following forms of proposition is the more forcible?—"Let us consider the duty of believers to make incessant advances in holiness, notwithstanding the temptations of the world, the trials of Providence, and the assaults of Satan;" "Let us consider the duty of Christians to use the conditions of a probationary life as a means of growth in grace." For the purposes of a statement of theme, does not the latter of these forms express all that is requisite, and express it the more forcibly for its brevity?

Further: propositions may be needlessly diffuse through repetition in varied language. If any single sentence of a discourse should be such as not to need varied repetition, it is the proposition. It may need repetition to make sure of the ear of the hearer, but should never be repeated by variations of statement for the sake of his understanding. Yet prolixity from repetition is an inveterate infirmity of the pulpit. It may result from a preacher's want of clear conception of his theme. A foreign critic says, that, with some writers, style grows out of thoughts; with others, thought grows out of style. In the case now in hand, the preacher's thought grows in the process of his anxious experiments in trying to give it intelligible form. The thought of the proposition grows out of its style. The same labor of mental apprenticeship to a subject which we noticed as often bungling an introduction produces, also, a confused proposition.

The subject of a discourse once presented here for criticism, when it was denuded of its mock profoundness, was this, "long-continued sin hardens the moral sensibilities of the sinner." But the preacher had not distilled it in his own mental laboratory down to this simple residuum. It was still seething and sputtering in the crucible of his own thinking. Said he, "Your attention is invited to a consideration of the fact that a disregard of the voice of duty, if long continued through a series of many years, exerts an injurious influence upon the entire moral man; that it is the nature of moral evil thus to infect and poison man's moral being, producing moral disease and death; that a violation of the moral laws of our being tends to an entire destruction of the moral sensibilities and to a degradation of all that distinguishes man as a subject of God's

moral government; and, in illustration of this subject, I remark first," etc. What subject? Who could divine it at the first guess?

Prolix repetition, again, may result from a certain mannerism in composing. Some writers crave rotundity of style for all important statements. They are unconsciously fascinated by fullness of sound in enunciation, — by what Cicero calls the *ore rotundo*. Their style, therefore, takes on the corpulent build whenever an emphatic thought is to be expressed. I select an example to the point, from Alison's "History of Europe." He is introducing a discussion of the principle of human progress, which, he says, lay at the foundation of the French Revolution. He announces his purpose as follows: "It is of the highest importance to inquire to what extent this principle is well-founded." Here, observe, is one statement of his proposition. But he proceeds: "to examine how far it is consistent with the experience of human nature." This is a second statement. But he adds: "and in what degree it is warranted by the past annals of mankind." A third statement, this, of the same proposition. One thing only is proposed in this threefold form. The thought is entirely clear, but as clear in its first statement as in its last, and more clear in either one than in three statements. The writer is beguiled into a cumbrous and prolix statement by the sheer mannerism of a rotund style. He was unconsciously straining after the "dignity of history." Had he been colloquially telling a friend what he just then wished to talk about, he would have said it, probably, in one utterance of a dozen Saxon words. But, because he was writing history for generations unborn, he must swell his utterance into this trimountain of a proposition.

Further: prolix repetition sometimes arises from a false conception of the object of a proposition. The error here suggested is the same with that which we have noticed, as often tempting to the needless use of intensive epithets in a proposition. It is that preachers strive to make propositions rhetorically impressive instead of lucidly expressive of the subjects. The theme may be clear: the speaker knows what he is about to discuss; but, instead of making it clear to the hearer in the proposition, he struggles to make it vivid. A case in hand will best illustrate this. A plan of a sermon once presented here for criticism was on the subject that "man by nature is destitute of holiness." This is a compact, lucid statement of the theme, and, so far as mere statement is concerned, this is the whole of it. But this was too calm for the preacher's mood. Flushed with the excitement of reflection on the subject, he was not content with clearness: he must gain intensity as well. Light was not enough: he must have a calcium light. He therefore ejected his theme in words like these: "Man, until regenerated by the Spirit of Almighty God, is absolutely sinful; wholly an enemy to God; in all the faculties of his being, distorted, depraved, guilty, and corrupt; so that no remnant of spiritual life remains in him, but he is dead in trespasses and sins, and an object of God's utter abhorrence."

Abstract attention, for a moment, from the theology of this invective: look only at its rhetoric. The preacher knew what he was at; he had very definite notions, as the result proved, of what the sermon was to be. He meant to give the hottest of hot blasts of hyper-Calvinistic theology. The misfortune was that his proposition was not fire-proof. It caught a flame

from his theology, and in a moment was ablaze. That is to say, the preacher put into the proposition the impressions which it was the business of the discussion to create. The result was prolix repetition, and, what is so often a further result of such a rhetorical error, gross exaggeration. Impression out of place very easily flares up into an extreme. Again and again it deserves to be repeated that a proposition is a statement, and only that. To vary it, and repeat it, and reiterate it, and intensify it, and magnify it, and dignify it, for the sake of rhetorical effect, are all foreign to its purpose. A perfect proposition never needs such handling. To inflict it on a good proposition is only hammering at the nail when it is already driven to the head.

This view leads to the further remark, that it is not good policy to lift a proposition, in point of impressiveness of structure, to a level with the conclusion. A proposition must always contain the conclusion; must often, in substance, be the conclusion; but it should invariably fall below the conclusion in impressiveness of statement. No single principle of homiletic policy is more variously applicable than this, "Leave room for increase of impression." Begin low, and work up. Leave space for rise of interest. Begin with a clear but calm statement of the truth; then set that truth to revolving; prove that truth; illustrate that truth; vary the position of that truth; disclose in light and shadow the proportions of that truth; till, as the discussion advances, the hearer feels that truth, and only that. Then in the conclusion you may assume that he feels it, and may proceed to apply it in the assurance that no language which it prompts you to employ will be an exaggeration, or will seem to be such to the

hearer's quickened conscience and deepened sensibilities. But to anticipate all this in the structure of the proposition is sheer reversal of nature. It can not succeed in its aim, and it would be an injury to the discourse if it should succeed.

Further: the proposition is often rendered needlessly diffuse by making it consist of the divisions of the sermon. That which has been termed the plural proposition is not relatively desirable. Unity may exist in such a proposition: necessity may rarely require it. But, when no necessity for it exists, its prolixity should exclude it. Test this in your own experience, when you incline to adopt Dr. Emmons's method of stating the theme by enumerating the divisions: pause, and ask yourself, "Why?" You will often find that you do it only for your own convenience in the discussion. It is always attended with this incidental evil, that it discloses the plot of a discourse at the outset. It leaves nothing to stimulate expectation by suspense of curiosity. This is often a sufficient objection to a prolix proposition, — that it discloses too much. Instead of furnishing only a center of interest, it marks out all the *radii* of the circle. To justify this the necessities of the subject should be imperative. When the gist of the subject can be made palpable without it, the plural form is an encumbrance. Only the gist of the subject is needed in a proposition.

The defects in point of prolixity which have now been named are illustrated in some sermons by distinguished preachers. Let me instance two examples which will at least show that it is scarcely possible to caricature the extreme of these defects beyond the reality of them in the literature of the pulpit. From the text, "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed

lest he fall," Bishop Lowth proposes thus: "That these words may not only enter into your ears, but sink down into your hearts, I shall first consider the instability of human affairs and the change of things; that both particular men and particular churches may fall from their steadfastness; and that, even while they think they stand, they may be in the greatest danger of falling: and, secondly, I shall endeavor to find out the way in which we may secure ourselves against such misfortune; that, whatever come, we may not fall, but stand against all assaults, and so persevere, till our work is done, to the end of the day, when we depart hence, in the Lord, to receive our reward or doom."

Two examples were promised. A young painter once requested permission to exhibit to his master two specimens of his handiwork for criticism. Only one was sent at the first to the master's studio. It was examined, and returned with this opinion: "I prefer the other." Wait till you hear "the other" before you hazard so adventurous a criticism. Dr. Donne, from the text, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," proceeds in this style: "These words will be fittest considered like a goodly palace, if we rest a little in an outer court upon a consideration of prayer in the general; and then draw the view of a palace in a second court, considering this precious prayer in particular as the face of the whole palace; and then we will pass through the chiefest rooms of the palace itself, and then insist on four steps being taken." This leads him to specify four subdivisions.

What conceivable object of a proposition can be gained by such harangues as these? They are scarcely intelligible; they certainly are uninteresting, except as caricatures no man can remember them; and their

bulk is frightful. There is scarcely a quality of a good proposition which they do not sacrifice. The proposition of a French preacher resembled these in magnitude of theme, but was infinitely superior in brevity and in sprightliness. Said he, "I shall discourse today, first, upon things which I know and you don't; secondly, upon things which you know and I don't; thirdly, upon things which neither of us knows."

(3) A third principle affecting the form of propositions is that a proposition should be as specific as it can be consistently with brevity. Specific statement is desirable specially for three reasons. It limits the range of a discussion; it concentrates attention; it stimulates interest.

Observe, therefore, in the first place, that, to promote the specific quality, the logical form of propositions should generally be preferred to the rhetorical form. Which is the more specific of the two following themes? First, "The divine government;" second, "The divine government is founded upon mingled justice and benevolence." Which is the more stimulating to attention? Again: on the same principle, the plural form of propositions must sometimes be preferred to the single form. Clearness occasionally demands a proposition in which the whole discussion is mapped. The divisions need to be specified like harbors on a chart. "I propose to consider, first this, secondly that, thirdly the other," is a form of proposition which may assist undisciplined hearers to follow an intricate discussion of an abstract theme. Any one of these contingencies — the mental character of the hearers, or the abstractness of the subject, or the involution of its treatment — may justify such a proposition; and all combined may demand it.

Further, to promote the specific quality, a proposition should always convey a complete idea in itself. "Let us consider this subject." What subject? "The reasons which enforce this duty upon all men." What duty? "I propose to show that this practice is condemned by reason, conscience, and the word of God." What practice? These forms of proposition, you perceive, are incomplete. An exposition of a text does not necessarily define a theme sufficiently as derived from the text. We may naturally call attention thus to the text itself, when the text is the subject. We may define a subject only in the general by designating it as "The subject presented in the text." But these are very different forms from that in which we ask attention to "this subject," "this duty," "this principle," and leave the hearer to his wits in discovering the theme of discussion. This will be best illustrated by an example in full. Take the following from the Rev. Dr. Romeyn, omitting the text, that you may see what a headless trunk a proposition may be to one who had not given attention to the text. Dr. Romeyn proposes thus: "To the means by which the latter were preserved from the desolation of the former, the manner in which this means was used, and the success which accompanied the manner of using the means, our attention is directed in the text. A few remarks explanatory of each of these particulars will first be offered, after which such a use will be made of the text as is suitable to the solemnity of the present occasion." What one specific idea do you derive from such a proposition? How much do you know of the object of the sermon?

Again: the specific quality requires that the proposition should not generally be stated in the exact language of the text. From the text, "It pleased the

Father that in him should all fullness dwell," Simeon derives the subject, "The Fullness of Christ." From the text, "Christ is all, and in all," he deduces the theme, "Christ is All." From the text, "Wrath is come upon them to the uttermost," President Edwards draws the proposition, "Wrath is come upon the wicked to the uttermost." What is the cause of the dullness of these forms of proposition? They are not obscure; they are not prolix: why are they so devoid of stimulus? It is because they specify nothing in advance of the letter of the texts. Scarcely do they vary the language of the texts. They do nothing to reproduce the ideas of the texts in modern and vivacious style. As propositions, therefore, they add nothing to the texts. As well might the texts stand alone. Contrast such propositions with this from Dr. Emmons. Text: "The bed is shorter than that a man can stretch himself on it; and the covering narrower than that he can wrap himself in it." Proposition: "A man's religion may be his ruin." This is clear, pithy, and alluring to attention, because it specifies in modern dialect the literal sense of the text. For the uses of a proposition it improves upon the text.

The specific quality in a proposition demands, further, that it should not specify any thing which is not discussed in the sermon. The proposition sometimes overreaches the sermon, not by needless or irrelevant synonyms, but through inadvertence. "The folly and guilt of being ashamed of Christ" is the theme of a sermon which discusses only the guilt of that sin. "The folly" of it is an excrescence. This example represents a class of cases in which the defect is not primarily in the substance, but in the form of the proposition. The cause of the defect is an unmeaning overflow of the style.

(4) A fourth principle respecting the form of the proposition is that it should be framed with as great degree of elegance as is consistent with clear and forcible expression. Finish of form often reduplicates force. Sculpture owes much to the purity and polish of marble. Similar qualities produce similar effects in style. The style of a proposition should comprise that rare blending and proportion of qualities which never make one think of the style. To this perfection of form, elegance is essential. Two things are fundamental to it.

Elegance requires the restriction of the vocabulary of propositions to classic English words. "The unbelief of gospel-sinners" is the subject of a sermon by the late Professor Shepherd. Imagine the sermon addressed to Lord Macaulay, or to Edward Everett. "Soul-prosperity," "soul-dejection,"—these are themes of sermons by Whitefield. What right have preachers, more than other scholars, to create a mongrel dialect? "Warning to carnal and worldly-minded professors" is the proposition of a discourse by Simeon. Professors of what? A few years ago, a sign over a shop in the Strand in London announced that a "professor of shirt-making" offered his services there. A sermon was once read in this lecture-room, for criticism, the preacher standing at the right hand of the presiding officer; and the proposition was "To consider the sins of professors." The usage of the pulpit has from time immemorial been unscholarly in retaining obsolete words, cant words, technical words, words never heard outside of the pulpit, which deform a proposition even more than any other fragment of a discourse, because its pre-eminence of position enforces attention to them.

Again: elegance in a proposition requires purity and

ease of English construction. "The guilt of unbelief under gospel light and the strivings of the Spirit, conscience can not but discern and condemn." Why is not this an elegant proposition? Because its construction is Latinized. It is Ciceronian, not English, except in the hybrid style of English for which critics have coined the epithet "Johnsonese." That is not a perfect proposition which attracts attention by its clumsiness. It may be clear; it may be forcible: but why not adorn and even augment these qualities by adding elegance as well?

(5) The fifth rule respecting the form of a proposition is that its preface should be distinct, simple, and on different occasions, varied. I refer here to the few prefatory words by which the announcement of a subject is foretold. These are often of more importance than they seem to be. First, the preface should be distinct. Let it indicate clearly, for the moment, that the subject is about to be defined. Give always a momentary forewarning, which shall be to the announcement of the subject what the bell of the telephone is to the message which is to follow it. Again: the preface should be simple. It is only a rhetorical expedient to call attention: do not make a parade of it. The most obvious thing to say is the best thing to be said.

The preface should be varied on different occasions. Five things suggest the most natural variations. One is the preacher; as when you say in announcing your subject, "I invite your attention;" "I propose to speak of;" "I design to prove;" "I intend to illustrate;" "It is my wish to consider;" "It is my purpose to remark upon," etc. But this form, always adopted, is egotistical. A second suggestion of variety is the text; as when you introduce your theme by observing, "The

text contains;" "The text invites;" "The text suggests;" "The text illustrates;" "The text is an example of," etc. But this form, always chosen, is monotonous. A third suggestion of variety is the sermon; as when you indicate your proposition by saying, "This discourse will be devoted;" "The remarks this morning;" "The discussion before us;" "The subject of our meditations;" "The theme of our reflections," etc. But this form, unvaried, is an excess of form. Sometimes the occasion may suggest the preface; as when you open the way by saying, "The occasion is favorable;" "The day is becoming;" "The services of the hour;" "The improvement of holy time," etc. But this, without variety, is stiff. The fifth thing which may pave the way to the subject is the audience; as when you say, "My friends and brethren;" "The experience of many of you;" "The inquiries of some of you;" "The difficulties which you have felt;" "The interest which some have expressed;" "The afflictions which some of you have suffered." The personal history of the audience may thus be made to suggest many subjects of discourse. This is not a hackneyed form of preface. It gives a gentle stimulus to attention. Always use your audiences in every natural way. As you prove, illustrate, explain, by reference to them, so build your subjects upon their thoughts, if you can. Seem to have selected the theme at their suggestion. It is an innocent art.

But the point I would emphasize is to aim at variety. You perceive that the possible forms of these rhetorical prefaces are innumerable. There is no need of monotony. A preacher, even in trifles, should not be a parrot. Charles Lamb used to exercise great ingenuity in his modes of subscribing his name to his letters. Genius

is not above care for such trivialities. But in preaching, nothing that saves a momentary sense of monotony is a triviality. Any thing that must be done is worth doing vivaciously. We should imitate Nature, which never makes two anemones alike. Even snowflakes, which are to melt in the falling, the microscope shows to be copies of an interminable variety of geometric figures, some of which science has never conceived till our times. If we were to select the one most significant and omnipresent sign of *life* in matter, mind, or spirit, it would be this one grace of all discourse, — variety.