

LESSON III.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

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LECTURE III.

THE SERMON: CLASSIFICATION, ANALYSIS.

II. THE generic idea of a sermon, then, is that of an oral address to the popular mind, on religious truth contained in the Scriptures, and elaborately treated with a view to persuasion. Proceeding with this generic idea of preaching, we are prepared to consider sermons more specifically as subject to certain varieties of classification.

1st, Homiletic classification is founded, either in practice or in theory, upon seven different principles. They are the following.

(1) One is the mode of delivery. On this principle, we recognize, in practice, sermons as delivered from manuscript, from memory, and extemporaneously. This, obviously, is not a rhetorical classification. The same principles of rhetoric apply to an extemporaneous as to a written discourse, if both are orally delivered. Relatively this is not an important classification. No vital principles of discourse are concerned with it: still, in practice, it is a convenient classification.

(2) A second classification is founded upon the occasions on which sermons are delivered. This, again, is a superficial arrangement of discourses: relatively it is unimportant; strictly it is not rhetorical. Still it is often a practical convenience to classify by occasion.

We therefore speak of "ordinary" and "occasional" sermons; and occasional sermons we subdivide indefinitely.

(3) A third classification is founded upon the subjects of sermons. Schott classifies sermons mainly by subject. He terms them "doctrinal," "practical," "historical," and "philosophical." But the distinction between "doctrinal" and "practical," as applied to sermons, is mischievous. Schott is apparently sensible of this; and he therefore tones down the distinction by terming the one class "doctrino-practical," and the other class "practico-doctrinal." This is keen analysis, and very necessary in practice, if the primary distinction is retained. It hints at the relative proportion of doctrinal discussion to practical application in the two classes of sermons.

Again: classification by subject is not a rhetorical method. As a rhetorical structure, a sermon is independent of subject; that is, its rhetorical peculiarities do not depend on its subject. Still it must be conceded that classification by subject is a practical convenience. Preachers do and will arrange subjects, rather than discourses. This may often take the place of more philosophical arrangements. It is impossible to reduce to a brief series all the themes of sermons; but, on this principle of division, the most important classes consist of sermons upon doctrines, upon duties, upon persons, upon events, and upon institutions.

(4) A fourth classification is founded upon the character of the audience addressed. This is not rhetorically significant of the differences of sermons. What matters it to the essential structure of a discourse, whether it be an argument addressed to learned hearers, or an argument addressed to the illiterate? An

argument is an argument; and this fact is the thing which determines its rhetorical character. Still the distribution of sermons by reference to the audience addressed is a practical convenience. Pastors often designate their discourses, and arrange the proportions of their preaching, by the questions: "Is this a sermon to Christians? to the unconverted? to parents? to children? to young men? to the aged? to the afflicted? to merchants? to clergymen? to Sabbath schools?" and so on indefinitely. Valueless as this method is for the purposes of rhetorical science, it has a large place in the habits of pastors.

(5) A fifth classification suggested by Dr. Campbell is founded upon the different faculties of mind to which sermons are supposed to be addressed. Dr. Campbell thus distributes the discourses of the pulpit into those addressed to the understanding, those addressed to the imagination, those addressed to the passions, and those addressed to the will. The ingenuity of this arrangement is unique. It would appear to be a neat, complete, philosophical distribution of all possible discourses. Yet it is remarkable for its unpractical character. We may safely believe that no man ever used it in adjusting the proportions of his preaching. Neither is there any rhetorical principle in this method of classification. Rhetoric does not go out of the discourse itself to find the principle by which to classify it. It analyzes the thing heard, not the hearer, to discover what that thing is.

(6) A certain anomalous classification, which is a peculiarity of homiletics, is founded on the use made of the texts of sermons. I term it an anomaly because general rhetoric does not recognize it. Oral discourse as such need not have a text. Outside of the pulpit

it commonly has none. Yet in the pulpit the text is a necessity, and the classification of sermons upon the use made of the text is convenient and of great value. Though an anomaly in rhetoric, we may accept it as homiletic. The anomaly grows out of the necessities of the pulpit. On this principle, sermons may be arranged in four classes, — the topical, the textual, the expository, and the inferential. The topical sermon is one in which a subject is deduced from the text, but discussed independently of the text. The textual sermon is one in which the text is the theme, and the parts of the text are the divisions of the discourse, and are used as a line of suggestion. An expository sermon is one in which the text is the theme, and the discussion is an explanation of the text. The inferential sermon is one in which the text is the theme, and the discussion is a series of inferences directly from the text: the text is the premise, a series of inferences is the conclusion.

As these distinctions are of great practical value in the labors of the pulpit, let me illustrate these four classes of sermons by examples in which the same text shall be employed in the four methods here indicated. The text is Phil. ii. 12, 13. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." From this text we may deduce the subject of the "Sovereignty of God in the Work of Salvation," or the subject of the "Activity of Man in Regeneration," or the "Duty of Earnestness in seeking Salvation." Either of these themes might then be discussed independently of any further use of the text, and we should thus have a *topical* sermon.

But we might make the text itself the theme of dis-

course, and might follow its line of thought by remarking: 1. The duty enjoined in the text, "Work out salvation;" 2. The individual responsibility for the soul's salvation implied in the text, "Work out your own salvation;" 3. The spirit with which salvation should be sought, "With fear and trembling;" 4. The dependence of effort to be saved upon the power of God, "It is God which worketh in you;" 5. Dependence upon God for salvation is the great encouragement to effort for salvation, "Work, *for* it is God which worketh in you." This train of thought developed would constitute a *textual* sermon.

Yet again we might make the text the theme, and let the sermon consist of an explanation of the text, by inquiring: 1. In what sense is a sinner commanded to achieve his own salvation? 2. What is the spirit of fear and trembling in the work of salvation? 3. In what sense does the text affirm God to be the author of salvation? 4. What connection does the text affirm between the earnestness of the sinner and the agency of God? An answer to these inquiries, devoted to the language of the text, and designed to evolve the force of the text, would constitute an *expository* sermon.

Once more: we might consider the text as the theme, and assume, that, as a well-known passage, it does not need much explanation. Explain it briefly, if you please, give in a paraphrase the result without the process of exposition, and then let the body of the sermon consist of a series of inferences drawn directly from the text. 1. That salvation is a pressing necessity to every man. 2. That every man is responsible for his own salvation. 3. That every man who is saved does in fact achieve his own salvation. 4. That dependence upon God is a help, not a hindrance, to salvation.

5. The guilt of trifling with religious convictions. 6. The unreasonableness of waiting in impenitence for the interposition of God. 7. The uselessness of lukewarm exertions to secure salvation. 8. The certainty that every man who is in earnest to be saved will be saved. This line of thought developed would be an *inferential sermon*. Its characteristic feature is neither topical, nor textual, nor expository discussion, but independent yet direct inference from the text.

(7) A seventh method of classifying sermons remains to be considered. It is a classification founded on the mode of treating the subject of discourse. This method is preferable to all others for several reasons. In the first place, it is a strictly rhetorical classification. It does not go outside of the discourse itself to find the character of the discourse. What is it that chiefly distinguishes one sermon from another? Not the subject, not the occasion, not the audience, not the method of delivery, not the faculty of mind addressed, not the use made of the text: it is the method of discussion. By this we must necessarily characterize any discourse as a rhetorical structure. Moreover, this is a practically convenient classification. The practical as well as the theoretic differences of sermons arise chiefly out of diversity of method in the treatment of subjects. Nothing else creates so wide a difference, or so many varieties. Again: this is a comprehensive classification: it covers all varieties of sermons. No variety exists in the usage of the pulpit, none is conceivable in homiletic theory, which it does not reach. Furthermore, it is no peculiarity of homiletics: it covers all varieties of oral address. The principle threads every thing known as public discourse, and does it naturally, without forced connections. Ask, respecting any kind of public speech,

what is its method of discussion, and you classify it instantly as a rhetorical structure, upon a principle which combines philosophical accuracy and practical convenience with comprehensiveness of application. Upon this principle of division, sermons may be arranged in four classes,—the explanatory, the illustrative, the argumentative, the persuasive.

Explanatory sermons, as the name indicates, include all sermons the chief object of which is explanation. It may be an explanation of a text; then the discourse is technically an expository sermon. It may be an explanation of a doctrine; then it is one kind of doctrinal sermon. It may be an explanation of a duty; then it is one kind of ethical sermon. It may be an explanation of a ceremony; then it is one kind of sermon on a positive institution. The rhetorical feature which characterizes all these discourses is the same,—the process of explaining what the thing is.

Illustrative sermons, as the name betokens, comprise all sermons the chief object of which is to intensify the vividness of truth; not to originate the knowledge of truth, but to realize conceptions of it already known; not to explain truth, though often it is an incident of illustrative discourse that it does explain; not to prove truth, though often it is an incident of illustration that it does prove. The prime object is to impart glow to truth, to make men feel the reality of what they know. It is literally to *illustrate*, to make truth lustrous, and therefore impressive. This class of sermons includes, you will perceive, descriptive discourses, sermons imaginative of biblical scenes, historical and biographical sermons, also a large class of discourses upon acknowledged doctrines, duties, virtues, the force of which lies dormant in the popular faith. The range and signifi-

cance of such preaching in nominally Christian lands are obvious at a glance. Not explanation, not logic, not hortation, but pictorial imagination holds the place of pre-eminence in such preaching among the conditions of ministerial success.

Argumentative sermons, as the title signifies, embrace all sermons the chief object of which is proof. They are aimed primarily at the intellect of the hearer. They propose either to create conviction where none exists, or to change conviction where the false exists. The prime element in such a discourse is logic pure and simple. The syllogism is the framework: belief is the result aimed at. This class comprises, therefore, a large proportion of so-called doctrinal sermons, also many ethical sermons.

Persuasive sermons have an infelicity in their title. It has been affirmed that all preaching has persuasion for its ultimate object, even that nothing is a sermon which is not aimed at persuasion. It is a misfortune to restrict the term "persuasive" to any one class of discourses; but no other one word designates the thing by which a certain class of sermons are distinguished. It includes all those sermons the *immediate* object of which is persuasion. The key-note of the persuasive sermon, technically so called, is urgency to present action.

2d, Before leaving this topic of the classification of sermons, several *memoranda* deserve mention.

(1) The classification here commended does not limit discourse to any one rhetorical method. The preponderance of one method, not the exclusion of others, gives character to every class. We pronounce a sermon explanatory, if explanation leads the discussion. Illustration, argument, hortation may all exist in it, but

only as subordinates. So each element, in its turn, may lead the discussion; and the sermon is classed accordingly. A classification which should leave no room for this intermingling of rhetorical elements would be practically useless. Practice would leap over it. In all good preaching the standard elements of composition are constantly interchanged, but always with subordination of the majority to one. Rhetoric and practice in this respect exactly tally. Use and beauty require the same thing.

(2) The four elements of discourse recognized in this classification cover every variety of oratorical composition. Explanation, illustration, argument, persuasion are all that exist of rhetorical material and method with which to deal. One or more of these four things must be done in all good discourse; and in such discourse nothing else can be done. When you have exhausted these four elements of speech, you have exhausted all the resources of speech. This classification, therefore, includes all the variety of which rational discourse is susceptible.

(3) The proper classification of sermons is fundamental to the subject of unity of discourse. A sermon can not be pointed in its aim, if it has no oneness of rhetorical character by which to classify it. The same qualities which adjust it to its class give it unity as an individual. If you have a clear idea of the kind of discourse which you purpose to frame, that localizes your sermon where it belongs, and at the same time goes far to unify it as a rhetorical structure. Oneness of impression results from the same process by which you gain oneness of construction.

(4) The proper classification of sermons is equally fundamental to the subject of proportion in preaching

In a ministry of ten years, the proportions of preaching depend more on the adjustment of the four grand methods of rhetorical discussion than on all things else combined. No variety of subject, of text, of occasion, of audience, will save you from monotony, if you always do one and the same thing with subject, text, occasion, and audience. Always explain, or always prove, or always paint, or always exhort, and versatility of impression is impossible, though you range the universe for themes. Construct your sermons for ten years so that you have symmetrical proportions of argumentative, of illustrative, of explanatory, and of persuasive materials, and you have symmetry of impression, without the possibility of monotony or of distortion. Be the impression strong or weak, it will be rounded. It will leave no blanks and no excrescences.

III. We have thus far considered the sermon in its generic idea and in its fundamental varieties. We have now to consider the analysis of a sermon. What are its constituent parts?

(1) In reply, let it be observed, that by the parts of a discourse are not meant portions necessarily visible as such to the eye in the manuscript. They are not apartments in the area of a sermon. Some of them are visibly distinct in the writing, and audibly distinct in the delivery, but not all of them.

(2) By the constituent parts of a sermon are not meant parts all of which are essential in every discourse. Nearly all of them are so, but exceptions exist.

(3) By the constituent parts of a sermon are meant those features of discourse, which, in the process of its construction, must engage the attention of the preacher. If sometimes one or more of the parts of a discourse

are unnecessary, still a preacher must consider them, that he may decide intelligently that they are unnecessary. Is an introduction superfluous in a given sermon? Perhaps so. But the preacher must consider whether or not it be so.

(4) Philosophically regarded, the number of the parts of a discourse depends on the limitation of terms. This accounts for the diversity in the analyses of discourse adopted by the ancient rhetoricians. Thus Aristotle reckons four parts only, the introduction, the proposition, the proof, the conclusion. Of these, he affirms that only the proposition and proof are essential to the rhetorical completeness of a discourse. Quintilian enumerates five parts, the introduction, the narration, the proof, the refutation, the conclusion. Yet there is no material distinction between Aristotle's proposition, and Quintilian's narration; between Aristotle's proof, and Quintilian's proof and refutation. The narration in Quintilian's analysis referred specially to forensic address: it was a lawyer's statement of his case. This corresponds to what Aristotle meant by the proposition. Proof and refutation also are parts of one process, which Aristotle, with a sharper analytic eye than Quintilian, discerns as such, and calls by one name. Does Aristotle, then, fail to recognize the introduction, when he pronounces it non-essential to the completeness of a rhetorical structure? Not at all. In a proposition he would in that case include all that is requisite to a skillful enunciation of the subject. The proposition thus extended would commonly comprise an introduction.

(5) It follows, then, that the question whether we shall adopt a condensed or an extended analysis of a sermon is chiefly one of convenience in criticism. For

purely scientific theory, the more condensed analysis is the more finished; but, for convenience in practical criticism, the more extended subdivision is the superior. I prefer, therefore, to enumerate the parts of a sermon as follows: namely, the text, the explanation, the introduction, the proposition, the division, the development, and the conclusion. Is the text a necessary part of a sermon? Yes, or no; on the same principle on which Aristotle in one view admitted, and in another rejected, the introduction. Doubtless a complete rhetorical structure on a scriptural theme may be formed without a text. The text may also be theoretically regarded as an incident to the proposition, and involved in the process of announcing a subject. But in practice preachers have a text: it is in practice commonly distinct from the proposition. Important homiletic questions concern it as a text, and a text only: therefore it is convenient to treat it thus in homiletic theory.

IV. We recognize, then, seven principal parts of a discourse for the pulpit, under the titles above named. It will be the object of the subsequent lectures to consider them in their order. Before doing so, however, I wish to forewarn you of several things which may otherwise occasion you some disappointment as we proceed.

Let me ask you to observe, first, the necessity of minute criticism in our discussion of these parts of a sermon. Many things must receive attention which may appear to you trivial. Relatively to some other things, they are trivial, considered singly; but in the aggregate they are not so. Preachers err egregiously who trust to the excellences of discourse to weigh down minute defects. Multitudes of clergymen suffer under a contracted usefulness, because their sterling virtues

are blocked by numberless little impediments which reduplicate the amount of friction. A commanding genius is required to force the way to results through deficiencies in themselves so small that genius despises them. But that which a genius can do successfully, I can not; probably you can not. Chrysostom, the golden-mouthed, may be useful in spite of violations of taste which would bury in oblivion a pastor of wooden speech. Besides, it is the inferior genius which contemns inferior excellences. The very first order of mind does no such thing. Michael Angelo did not think it beneath him to execute one of the consummate marvels of his genius in the carving of a peach-stone. So the most exalted style of manhood in the ministry will count no excellence too minute to subserve the objects of the pulpit. Some of the processes of preaching are of such a character, that no genius can force them. They must be performed warily, gently, scrupulously. They are like the movements of a watch: only a few grains of sand are needed to clog them; and the more perfect the movement, the more easy its arrest.

A second preliminary suggestion is that of the necessity of profuse illustration in the discussion of the parts of a sermon. Mr. Dickens says that criticism in literature of any kind "is not worth a farthing without innumerable examples." This is doubly apt in application to homiletic criticism. The mere statement and eulogy of principles, however minute, form the most useless kind of discourse on such topics as must come before us. By far the most difficult part of the process needed is the discovery or the invention of pertinent illustrations.

A third suggestion, preliminary to the work before us, is that a defect in preaching often needs to be made

ludicrous to excite our repugnance to it effectually. A curious phenomenon in literary history is this, that the pulpit has tolerated faults which literary taste endures nowhere else. The seriousness of the work of the pulpit seems to have acted as a shield to deformities which good taste feels to be intolerable elsewhere. There is no remedy for this shelter of the pulpit from robust criticism, except that preachers should therefore be more severe in their criticism of themselves. No other fault is so hurtful as one which is sanctified by its surroundings. Honest good sense may see it, but can not get at it through fear of irreverence. We must subject ourselves to healthful criticism in such a case. If we can fix in mind a vivacious caricature of such faults, put them into the dress of a clown, we do ourselves a good service. Blessed be the man who invented caricature! We are compelled to practice this adroitness on our own minds to spur them up to an instinctive repulsion of a fault which we shall tolerate otherwise on the plea that we have a pious object. Set that down as the plea of mental indolence: it is nothing else. The proper antidote to it is ridicule.

The fourth preliminary remark is that in these lectures many things must be observed the necessity of which you will outgrow. Homiletic discipline is sometimes undervalued heedlessly as a preacher advances in his profession, because he finds, that, in some respects, he leaves the need of it behind him. His own good sense teaches him some of its lessons so thoroughly, that he begins to doubt whether the time ever was when he did not know them by heart. But homiletic discipline does its work for a man, if it expedites his experience. A young man receives a great boon in any thing which economizes expenditure of his early manhood. Homi-

letic lectures, therefore, should in my view be aimed at the early years of practice in the pulpit. Their immediate object is to teach a man how to begin his work. They are valuable just in proportion to their power to diminish the inevitable waste of early effort to its minimum. That a young preacher quickly outgrows them is the best evidence that they have been effective. That discipline in every thing which we outgrow the need of is the discipline to which we are the most deeply indebted. Literature contains no other one thing to which we owe so much as to the Roman alphabet.

These remarks suggest a fifth preliminary: it is that homiletic instruction can never make a preacher. Unreasonable expectations often defeat the very object of homiletic discipline. Men often come to it, not as to discipline, but as to a process of accumulation. They expect to be put in possession of a new power of speech. They expect homiletics to give them pulpit eloquence, as history gives them the opinions of the past, and dogmatic theology those of the present. This is absurd. Preaching is a business. Every business must be learned in the main by the doing of it. The theory can give you principles to start with, can forewarn of perils, can set up defenses, can disclose existing faults in culture, can reveal abnormal tendencies of mind, and disproportion of mental character, can do all that theory does for a man in any thing which is a practical business. In brief, it can make the business practicable; but it can never create the doing of it. A man must work the theory into his own culture, so that he shall execute it unconsciously. This he can do only by his own experience of the theory in his own practice till it becomes a second

nature. This is the work of time. We learn how to live by living: so we learn how to preach by preaching. Yet law, principle, theory have as valuable a use in the one case as in the other. Vinet says that the "homiletics of the study should leave room for that of the temple and the parish." Not so: the homiletics of the study *is* that of the temple and the parish. So far as it becomes a part of the preacher himself, he will be constantly emitting it from his own culture in expedients of usefulness which will be the legitimate fruits of it, but which will seem to him to be the spontaneous production of the hour