

LESSON XXII.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

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NEW YORK

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

1895

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THE PROPOSITION : SUBSTANCE.

3D, We pass now to the relation of a proposition as a whole to the body of the sermon ; observing as a third principle respecting the substance of the proposition, that it should be identical with the body of the sermon.

(1) A proposition should not comprise more material than can be impressively discussed in one sermon. The necessity of this caution will be seen from remarking, in the first place, the tendency of imperfectly disciplined minds to indulge in excessive latitude of subject. What is the result of such excessive propositions? Usually the discussion falls short of the proposition. Sometimes, however, the sermon is sacrificed to the preacher's strain to equal his proposition. It ceases to be a discourse : it becomes an abstract of a discourse. Elaborate it may be, but as a table of contents is elaborate. Arguments are stated which there is no time to amplify. Facts are affirmed which there is no room to prove ; or proved, which there is no space to illustrate. Conclusions are reached logically which the bulk of the structure will not suffer to be impressed by any natural method of application. Inferences are named of which even the logical accuracy is not made obvious. The structure is not discourse : it is only a mammoth skeleton of discourse. Like Bun

yan's Apollyon, it "straddles over the whole breadth of the way."

In other cases, the result of excessive latitude of theme is the sacrifice of the vitality of the sermon by commonplace in details. Generalities in thought naturally take on hackneyed forms in style. These flow in monotonous succession, like the fall of a mill-stream. Weigh them down with a sympathetic delivery, and you will have the clerical humdrum in comical perfection. Hence have arisen dull, ponderous, indolent, corpulent bodies of divinity in sermons, which remind one of a child's first attempts at composition on duty, friendship, truth, education, industry, time, eternity. Such discourses are not necessarily an indication of a feeble or inactive intellect. They betoken only a mistake in rhetorical policy. The most mercurial minds may be cheated of all their originality of invention by the selection of one of these oceanic themes.

This leads us to observe, further, that restriction of subject assists the invention of original materials. A youthful writer is often led to the choice of an excessive bulk of substance, if he chooses it consciously, by the belief that vastness of subject will insure abundance of materials, and that for him, in his inexperience, it may be necessary in order to secure sufficiency of materials. Just the reverse of this is true in fact. If your inventive power is sluggish, restriction of theme will stimulate it: if it is active, restriction of theme will give it scope. Invention exercised on a restricted proposition is microscopic. It discovers much, which, in ranging over a broader surface, it would lose. It is penetrative. It goes in to the heart of a theme. The mind labors, if the expression may be allowed, perpendicularly, not horizontally, not

obliquely. The result of such labor is that kind of discussion which is the opposite of discursive. The sermon impresses a hearer with the conviction that the marrow of the subject has been reached. The preacher speaks from a full experience of its richness in his own mind. Such preaching seems inspired.

Observe a few illustrations of this stimulus to invention from restriction of theme. Do not certain packed propositions quicken your thinking upon them in the very hearing? Listen to Dr. South: "Religion is the best reason of State;" "Good intentions are no excuse for bad actions;" "Concealment of sin is no security to the sinner." Do not such aphoristic propositions invite thought? Hear Reinhard: "Faithfulness in present duty qualifies for higher functions;" "The instruments which God chooses are not such as man would have chosen;" "The temptations attending opportunities of doing good." Who does not feel that he could enjoy constructing a sermon on any one of these themes? The singleness of them is interesting: the compactness of them is quickening. Yet the whole of them, and as many more, have often been spread out sprawling, and with ample room to spare, in one flabby discourse on the Importance of Religion.

Moreover, restriction of subject has a tendency to freshen stale truths. "Go thy way for this time: when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee;" — a stale text is this. How shall we elude a stale sermon? Thousands of discourses have been preached from this text, on procrastination of repentance. Can we get any thing better from it? Study the text for a moment in its surroundings. From the context, it appears that Felix was deeply interested in St. Paul's preaching. What was it which attracted him so greatly at

the first? It was the "faith in Christ," we are told; that is, it was the theory of the new religion. What was it in the second hearing which led the governor to give the polite rebuff to the Apostle? It was the preaching of "righteousness, temperance, and the judgment to come." That is, when the preacher began to develop the practical bearings of Christianity upon certain sins of which Felix was notoriously guilty, then it was that the message was so coolly given, "Go thy way." Therefore we educe from the text this proposition, that "Men who are deeply interested in religion as a theory often revolt from it as an experience." Are not the stale text and the commonplace subject, by such restriction of range, freshened to the thought of both preacher and hearer?

This vitalizing of stale themes is one of the great arts of the pulpit. Avoid such themes we can not. Treat them in the rut of centuries of preaching we dare not. We must accept them for dead truths; and all the ingenuity of homiletic art, and the magnetic force and the prophetic inspiration of the preacher must be called into requisition to resuscitate them. We must brood over such subjects with the intensity of our own being, as the prophet stretched himself upon the dead body of the widow's child, till a new life is breathed into them. Any expedient which can assist that inspiration may be vital to our success. One such expedient is that of a retrenchment of theme for the sake of concentration of force.

Further: restriction of subject is of special value to the interest of doctrinal preaching. Doctrinal preaching and dull preaching are, in the popular estimate, synonymous. We deceive ourselves, if we charge the unpopularity of doctrinal sermons to the account of

depravity, and leave it there. The prime cause of the popular distaste for theological discussion in the pulpit is its want of certain elements which are essential to vivacity. Study the experience of the pulpit candidly, and you will discover that audiences will listen attentively to any thing which seems to them to be alive.

Why did such events as the burning of the "Lexington," the wreck of the "Arctic," the duel between the "Merrimack" and the "Monitor," and the conflagrations at Chicago and Boston start up all over the land discussions of the doctrine of a special Providence? Not only in pulpits and prayer-meetings, but in secular newspapers, in magazines, in railway-cars, in steamboats, at coroner's inquests, and at tea-tables, within three months after each of those events, men wrote and talked enough on the doctrine of Providence to make up the sermons of a lifetime. Goethe tells us that a similar state of things all over Europe followed the earthquake at Lisbon. Was it dull talking and stale reading? Did men go to sleep over it? Why not? Simply because it was religious doctrine born into real life, and reproduced in living speech. Men felt the need of it; and they gave and took it in the forms of real life. The same is true of any other doctrine. Make the doctrine live, and live men and women will accept it as their spiritual food. Truth or falsehood, it makes little difference. Any thing can obtain an interested hearing which has any mental oxygen in it.

Infidelity will outstrip orthodoxy in any community, sooner or later, if all the electric force seems to be given over to error, and truth has to bear all the dead and dying and decaying things of civilized life, and to struggle through the consequent mephitic vapors. Let the resources of learning, the courage of inquiry,

the energy of reform, a vitalized style be found in infidel literature, and there only, while the religious press falls behind and below in these tokens of mental quickening, and we must not croak over the degeneracy of the times, if truth goes under for a while, and error rides the wave. This world is, in the main, a living world. Life craves life. Thought runs to thought. Originality springs to greet originality. Awakened readers clamor for quickened authors. Live hearers will throng upon live speakers. The pulpit, in this respect, is subject to no hardship. It only comes under the common law of all living thought. The Holy Spirit does not work miracles to give success to dullness.

We must, therefore, meet fairly the question, How shall life be infused into doctrinal discussions? Many things are requisite, but at present we are concerned with one only. It is the rhetorical expedient of restricting the substance of the theme for the sake of stimulating the invention of the preacher. A standing grievance in the pulpit on this subject is that of attempting too much in one discourse. Rarely, if ever, should a standard doctrine of theology be presented entire in one sermon. What is the necessary effect of such crowding of material? Recall your own experience as listeners. Have you not heard sermons of this kind which were only synopses? They had not a fragment of any oratorical element in them. They were abstracts of theological treatises. A sermon, so called, was once preached in Boston, in which the nature, the necessity, the proofs, the extent, and the moral influences of the Atonement were all treated in succession. It was one of the most unimpressive discourses I ever heard, yet on a theme imperial in its grandeur. It was delivered

to a most listless handful of an audience. It fell like lead. No fault of the hearer was it, if he was neither sanctified nor converted by such a sermon. Preaching under such a load of subject is like swimming in a diving-bell. Such synopses of theology are not made for the pulpit any more than the diving-dress is made for speed.

If preachers should treat every other class of themes in this suffocating method, all preaching would soon become as lifeless and as unpopular as much of the so-called doctrinal preaching is to-day. On the other hand, if you will preach upon doctrines as you preach upon duties, by analyzing the themes in bulk, and retrenching the range of single topics, and thus securing opportunity to use your materials as you would use other means of moral impression, you will find no other themes of the pulpit so popular as the doctrines of the theological system. Dr. Griffin's most powerful discourses were doctrinal discussions. Look at the "Park-street Lectures," doctrinal sermons every one. They were so high-toned in their severity of legal preaching as to win for the junction of Tremont and Park Streets the nickname of "Brimstone Corner." Yet they were preached to crowded and entranced assemblies. Dr. Nettleton's most popular sermons were upon "election" and "decrees."

Dr. Chalmers's sermons on depravity were delivered to enraptured crowds; and the few in the windows reported fragments to the multitude which filled the street below. One reason of the popularity of those discourses was that he threw aside the historic formulæ of the doctrine, and restricted attention in each sermon to one leading thought, repeating and reiterating that thought in such variety of rhetorical forms that his

cumbrous style was no impediment to its reception, but a help rather. It operated like a sledge-hammer to drive the matter home. The series numbers seventeen discourses. Listen to some of the propositions: "The Necessity of the Holy Spirit to give Effect to the Preaching of the Gospel;" "An Estimate of the Morality which is without Godliness;" "The Judgment of Men compared with the Judgment of God;" "The Folly of Men who measure Themselves by Themselves;" "The Affection of Moral Esteem towards God;" "The Power of the Gospel to dissolve the Enmity of the Heart against God."

Compare these propositions with the stereotyped method of discussing the doctrine of depravity. They could all of them, and several more, be compressed into a sermon in which a preacher should announce as his subject the doctrine of total depravity. "First, what is not the true doctrine; secondly, what is the true doctrine; thirdly, biblical proofs of the doctrine; fourthly, the evidences of the doctrine from reason and from experience; fifthly, applicatory inferences and remarks." Hearers of such a sermon would retire,—the pious hearers silent, or wishing, for their children's sake, that they could have more "practical" preaching, and the profane hearers grumbling, or scoffing at antiquated theology. Chalmers, on the other hand, sent home his hearers of both classes delighted with the attractiveness, and impressed with the power, of the same theology, even in the forms of Scotch Calvinism. His power to do this was due, in part, to his taking time to do it, and concentrating his invention on fragments of the truth, instead of massing the whole in one unwieldy and indigestible bulk.

Preach by the scholastic model, and you doom your

self to drudgery, and your hearers to somnolence. Preach by the (if I may coin the word) Chalmerian model, and, with precisely the same ultimate materials, you become a genius to your hearers for your originality, and they become converts at your will. The distinction between doctrinal and practical sermons, by which the one is the synonym of dullness and the other of life, vanishes. Both are alive, because you give yourself room to put life into them.

The principle advocated in these remarks suggests the inquiry whether the more comprehensive method of discussion is ever expedient in the pulpit. This leads me to observe that comprehensive themes may sometimes be demanded by speciality of occasion. The discourse for which Rev. Albert Barnes was first arraigned for heresy before the Presbyterian courts was upon substantially the whole system of the gospel. It was entitled "The Way of Salvation." Its object was to present in a single bird's-eye view the whole plan of God in saving men. That sermon he afterwards amplified into thirty-six discourses, which he published as a volume of nearly five hundred pages.

In like manner any preacher may find special occasion for presenting an entire doctrine, or even a group of kindred doctrines, in one sermon. One may wish to run over the keys of all those doctrines which appeal to fear, for the sake of showing the legitimacy of that emotion in religious experience. Occasionally, to show that a doctrine is one of a group of doctrines, and that, without it, the symmetry of divine truth would be defective, may be a valuable work. One of the most convincing proofs of the truth of eternal punishment, to thoughtful inquirers, is the fact of the necessity of it to a certain balance with other truths of divine revela-

tion. Depravity, Regeneration, Atonement, and Eternal Retribution form a quadrilateral system of theology. No one of them can be obliterated without loss to the rest. They are in keeping with each other. The intensity of each requires the intensity of the others to preserve an equilibrium of moral impression. To show that an endless retribution is one of such a four-fold group of truths may be, to a certain class of thinkers, the only decisive proof of its reality.

All such examples are exceptional. They are justified, if at all, by some speciality of aim. They are not thorough discussions of all the truth presented. They would have no moral force if they were the common product of the pulpit. They need to be preceded and followed by more analytic discussions requiring restriction of theme.

(2) Passing now from the topic of retrenchment of proposition, let us observe further, that the substance of a proposition should not comprise less material than is sufficient for impressive discussion in one sermon. A theme of discourse may be diminutive in itself considered. A German preacher once discoursed on the best method of manufacturing vinegar. Another preached on benevolence in the care of bees. A pastor in Massachusetts preached on the sin of raising apples for cider; another, on the evil of lounging on the doorsteps of the church during the intermission of divine service on the Sabbath. A preacher in New Jersey preached on the marriage of Adam. Each of these subjects, except the first, had a religious or a moral idea as its basis. Even upon the first, a useful, though acid, discourse might be delivered. Yet it is obvious that intrinsically they are puny themes. A preacher's mind is in a molecular mood in selecting such themes. They

are scarcely crumbs from a Master's table. Yet in more doubtful cases a discussion may suffer from excessive restriction of subject. A subject is to be suspected of this defect, if, in planning a discourse upon it, you find yourself straining to dignify it by force of style. A good subject sustains the style, not the style the subject.

Again: a theme may be diminutive relatively to the materials amassed for its discussion. It was a mark of prolific genius that Cowper could evolve so long and so rich a poem as "The Task," and one which entered at once into the rank of the standards of the language, from the subject of "A Sofa," accidentally suggested to him by Mrs. Unwin. Yet such productions are unnatural structures. They build materials in unnatural proportions. They are pyramids on apexes. They do not grow out of a symmetrical taste. To such a taste it is no defense of a diminutive subject to say that it has remote and underground connections with themes the noblest and most profound. All thought has such connections. But the highest inventive power will not, therefore, exhaust itself by choosing diminutive centers of thought. An Indian tobacco-sign has remote resemblance to the anatomy and muscular development of a man. But an artist does not, for that reason, choose it as his model of an Apollo. Nothing is greatest which is eccentric. Michael Angelo is said to have abandoned painting on canvas, because of his disgust at the pettiness of it as compared with painting in fresco. Fresco-painting, he said, was the art for heroes, because no other gave scope to the execution of great designs. So genius in literature craves a certain naturalness of things to things in its productions. On this principle perfect discourse demands naturalness of materials to

subject in this element of size. That can not be a comely structure in which immense or profound thought hangs as a pendant to a proposition of which the first and the last impression is trivial.

Further: a theme of discourse may be diminutive relatively to the dignity of the pulpit. Not every useful theme is sufficiently useful to deserve a place in the pulpit. Not every useful theme is religious enough for the pulpit. Not every religious theme is important enough for the pulpit. No other spot on earth is so environed by associations of dignity as a Christian pulpit. Its subjects should bear proportions to such associations. The popular instinct, which prompts a man to lift his hat on entering a place of worship, should be honored by a preacher in the selection of a subject of discourse which deserves such an act of popular reverence. We need something of the character of command in the proposition of a sermon. The first impression of it, and the last, and the dignity of it, therefore, in the memory, should be such as to sustain the pulpit in its appeal to the reverence of men. For this end a certain bulk of substance is essential. We should often inquire whether a restricted theme is not more properly a division than a proposition. That which is necessary as a division, or valuable as an application, may have no such commanding importance as to be worthy of a place at the head of a sermon.

Yet again: a theme of discourse may be diminutive relatively to the claims of other subjects upon the pulpit. Time in the pulpit is invaluable. No preacher can afford to squander an hour of it. The vital, the necessary, the imperial topics of homiletic discussion are more in number than the opportunities of preaching in any one lifetime. Multitudes of such themes throug

every pulpit. Great themes are always waiting for a hearing. Young preachers sometimes fear a dearth of subjects in looking forward to a life's work. That is the last thing you need to fear, if you are studious preachers. Dr. Archibald Alexander is reported, though I doubt the fact, to have advised a young minister, that, when he had exhausted his stock of subjects, he could always "pitch into Romanism." Never was advice more useless. "Pitch into" your Bibles, rather, would I say. Keep a commonplace book of fertile texts and suggestive themes, and you will find that no other inventory of your intellectual property will crowd your pulpit so soon or so hopelessly. Your despair will soon be, not "What shall I preach?" but "What may I omit in preaching?" Ten subjects for one which you can find time and place for in your preaching will you accumulate in your inventory. Select, then, the choice themes of discussion, and only those. Of important themes, choose the most important. Of prolific themes, give place to the most prolific. Deal only with superlatives. Accept only the aristocracy of thought. Apply mercilessly the law of natural selection. Let only that live which must live.

The Rev. James Alexander says on this subject, "I am impressed with the importance of choosing great subjects for sermons. . . . They should be the great themes which have agitated the world, which we should like to have settled before we die, which we should ask an Apostle about if he were here. They are to general Scripture truth what great mountains are to geography. . . . A man should begin early with great subjects. An athlete gains might only by great exertions." In this view of the matter, then, it is clear that no pulpit

has room for diminutive propositions. We should not be deterred from the adoption of this policy by the fact that the great themes are the hackneyed themes of the pulpit. They doubtless are such. This is an inevitable evil which must be met, but it is less than it seems. The great subjects are not the same to any two minds. No two preachers would treat them alike, unless one or both should borrow. The range of suggestion of a great theme is immeasurable. The opportunity for versatile treatment is immense.

Mark the analogy of the work of the pulpit in this respect with other great arts. The great sculptors and painters have chosen the same scenes and characters. Their fame rests, for the most part, on a few great subjects; yet no two productions are alike. Go through the galleries of Italy, and you will find that the really great works of painting and sculpture are on very few subjects, and these often repeated. So the great tragedies of the drama revolve in dramatic passion a few great ideas. From Æschylus and Sophocles downward, the greatness of the drama has not consisted in the multitude of its ideas. Shakespeare originated but very few plots. He elaborated those which had already proved their power over the human sympathies. The same principle holds good in preaching. The great subjects, though few, never lose their power if treated by a fresh mind. The need of them never grows old. Put your soul into them, and they are always fresh.

Further: a theme of discourse may be diminutive relatively to symmetry of impression. Some propositions it is not safe to divide, and discuss on different occasions. The objections to a doctrine may be in themselves an ample subject for one sermon; but it might be unwise to construct a discourse of such

materials, reserving the answer to a subsequent time. This experiment was once tried by a preacher to the students of a New England college. In the morning he delivered a sermon composed almost wholly of objections to a certain doctrine, and gave notice that he would answer them in the afternoon. He laid out his strength upon an effort of candor; stated the skeptical argument in full, as if he were himself the skeptic; and ended in the triumphant consciousness that he would demolish the whole structure in a few hours. The students enjoyed the skeptical preacher hugely. The afternoon came, and with it a furious thunder-storm while the church-bells were ringing. Very few students were present; and the preacher had the credit of having delivered an unanswered, if not unanswerable argument against his own faith.

Again: certain subjects contain opposite elements of impression which symmetry may forbid us to sunder. They lie over against each other. They are fortresses which have an outlook to the east and to the west. One of such twin doctrines discussed alone may not be truthful. As the human body has double brains, so the human mind has affinities for these double truths. In some connections, to separate them is like looking at one only of the two sections of a stereoscopic picture. Finally: the force of cumulative arguments may be weakened by dismemberment. Cumulative argument depends on continuity of impression. Separate the links of the chain and the magnetic accumulation of impression is impracticable: cumulation demands unity.