

LECTURES ON SACRED RHETORIC.

LECTURE I.

INTRODUCTORY.

MY YOUNG BRETHREN :

SOME well-meaning Christians meet us at the threshold of our subject, with objections to the application of an art of Rhetoric to sacred topics. These may appear plausible enough to need a reply. Not only do they advance the trite assertions, "*Poeta nascitur, non fit,*" and, "Nature is a better teacher than art;" they draw peculiar pleas from the sanctity of the preacher's function and motive, and even from the word of God. They claim that the messenger, who bears the gospel of love to man, should be unaffected and sincere. They say that while those who argue less worthy causes may perhaps excuse their art, the preacher should be above all art. They cite against us the twice-repeated declaration of the apostle Paul, that his "speech and his preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power."¹

To the first observation I answer, that if the orator

¹ See 1 Cor. ii. 4, 13.

is born, his oration is not. That, at least, must be made. Rhetoric does not profess to create a vigorous understanding, feeling, taste and genius, but only to teach their most effective use. The artisan does not make hands for his apprentice, but he shows him how to use the members Nature has given him. And the man of common mould is enabled, by means of this training, to make a better plough or cart than could be produced without it by the youth whose limbs matched those of the *Apollo Belvidere*. If it is urged that we not seldom hear the untaught son of Nature, by virtue of the original nobility of his faculties, speak with far more true eloquence than the assiduous rhetorician, the reply is obvious. Those excellent gifts of Nature should have been perfected by true culture, so that this fortunate man might have excelled his fellows of the common, but trained capacity, even farther than he did. For all that excellence he owed to his God, by the rule that we must "love him with all our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength." The unskillfulness of the professed rhetorician may also prove, not that his art is worthless, but that he has imperfectly acquired it. You will easily conceive how a system of real value, if only half mastered, and by reason of deficient experience in its application, employed without facility, may embarrass instead of aiding us. The royal armour of King Saul was doubtless of the best temper. We do not doubt that David used such with splendid advantage in his subsequent career of conquest. But when the raw shepherd-boy was clad with it, he found himself encumbered by it, "because he had not proved it."

The assumption that the preacher's sacred attitude is above rhetoric reveals ignorance of the nature of true art. Let us then, at the outset, seek a correct conception of it. And we may be led to this idea by considering the distinction between art and artifice. Art is but the rational adjustment of means to an end.¹ Art is adaptatiou; it employs proper means for a worthy end; it is hut wisdom in application. Artifice is false; it adopts deceitful means for a treacherous end. When the benevolent physician compounds a drug, which his learning shows to be a specific cure for a disease, this is art. When the cunning seducer prepares a seeming attraction which is not indeed real, to inveigle his prey into the snare, this is artifice. There is a popular application of the word art which has also assisted to delude the judgment of these objectors. It is that which we express usually by the term "fine arts," in which the end of the skill employed is only to gratify taste, and not to evoke practical volition. I shall show that the art of eloquence is contrasted with these, in that its aim is ever intensely practical. And I shall urge that, whenever the preacher permits his aim to degenerate into that of the painter or musician, the mere pleasure of taste, he flagrantly violates both the principles of his art and of his religious duty. But I assert none the less that, since this duty is to convey gospel truth effectively to other souls, and since there are adapted means by which this end may be the better accom-

¹ Art, from *Ars* (root, *art-is*) which is from Greek *αρω*, to adjust, whence *αρωω*, *αρος*, joined. *Art* is, therefore, adjustment. Webster's derivation, from W. *cerz* and Ir. *ceard*, carrying the rudimental idea of *strength*, is as far-fetched as absurd.

plished, there is a true art of preaching, which is not only lawful and honest, but sacredly obligatory.

The opponents whom we now consider love to contrast art with nature. I assert that all true art is natural. If man is by nature a creature of reason and conscience; if duty, forecast, judgment, will, desire of legitimate success, are natural to him, then surely he does not obey, but violates his nature when he discards the use of adapted means for his ends. If there are gifted souls who, without that detailed study of art which is necessary for us common mortals, are able to effectuate their ends more nobly than we with all our labour, then the explanation is that their more powerful genius has only made a quicker and easier intuition of their art. To reach that pinnacle of efficiency, they have ascended the common stairway, for there is no other. The difference is, that while we climb it step by step, their superior vigour enables them to bound up it with almost unconscious effort. Moreover, it is not true that these advocates of pure nature discard art. They are not naturally so natural as they claim to be. It was the fashion for the infidel school of Rousseau and the Encyclopædists to call savages "children of nature;" yet a savage is the least simple of men. He is the slave of his conventionalities, his fashions, his artifices. The only difference is, that they are unlike to, and more intense than, those of the civilized man. So, those speakers who profess to leave all to nature, are always most unnatural; they have not only art, but artifice and mannerism, and are more in bondage to them than the true artist. Art, I repeat, is but a well-adapted method, and the real option which we have is not between art

and nature, hut only between art wise and art foolish, art skilful, or art clumsy. Indeed, the result of true art is simply to assist Nature to perfect herself, and thus to open the way for her to her worthiest ends. Thus I retort the conclusion upon our objector. I assert that unless he holds men's faculties permit no employment of methods, and that their first untaught essays are necessarily their best, he must grant a legitimate art of sacred rhetoric. And it is not only the preacher's privilege, hut sacred duty to seek and use it.

We easily escape the seeming disclaimer of the great Apostle, by asking what was that rhetoric which he repudiated, and whether he did not employ a method of his own? The Christian antiquary answers the first question. The spurious and unworthy art which is here rejected, was that of the Greek Sophists—a system of mere tricks of logic and diction, prompted by vanity and falsehood, and misguided by a depraved taste. It was the pretentious rhetoric so scathed by the sarcasm and reasoning of Socrates in the *Gorgias*. While the Apostle disclaimed this, surely he did not preach without any method! He adopted an appropriate one of his own. If you say that it was honest, as opposed to the deceitfulness of the Greeks; that it was simple, as opposed to the ambitious complexity of the Greeks; that it was modest, as opposed to their ostentation; that it was disinterested, as contrasted with their overweening selfishness, I assent, and I add that these are the things which made St. Paul's a true rhetoric. Let us then adopt the ascertaining of his method as the object of our search. Let us make our sacred rhetoric just his, so far as it was primarily taught him

by the Holy Spirit, and taught him next by his high culture and pure devotion.

The objection drawn from the inhibition of previous care and preparation to the apostles, when brought before persecutors, can scarcely embarrass you for a moment. Our Saviour said to them, "Settle it in your hearts not to meditate before what you shall answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay or resist." This command is based evidently upon the accompanying promise. It should be asked, Was the promise made to them as common ministers, or as inspired apostles? This is determined by the "signs which should follow;" speaking with tongues, healing the sick, casting out devils. It is, then, a mere wresting of the Scriptures, to claim for the uninspired preacher that extraordinary inspiration, superseding the necessity for premeditation, which is as truly miraculous as the divine works that attested its source. Our Saviour's prohibition seems to forbid immediate preparation for a particular discourse, even more clearly than the general study of the art of speaking. But who would now pretend that the minister ought not even to meditate upon the subject which he is about to expound? It is, surely, sufficient proof that the apostle Paul did not understand preparation to be unlawful, that we find him commanding Timothy "to give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine, to meditate upon these things, and give himself wholly to them, that his profiting might appear unto all."¹

¹ Luke. xxi. 14; 1 Ep. to Tim. iv. 13-15.

Whateley¹ cites, as he says, from Aristotle, a very plain and conclusive illustration of the matter in debate. There are two men who have had equal opportunity to observe and comprehend a transaction. Each of them undertakes to relate it to his friends, who did not witness it. One of them so narrates it that his story is perspicuous and graphic, and is listened to, not only without effort, but with keen pleasure. The other so confuses his account of it, that his relation is irksome to the listeners, and fails to convey that apprehension of the matter which was designed. Do not such instances often occur in fact? Now, says Aristotle, the difference in the way in which these two men tell their story, is rhetoric. Wherein does that difference consist? This is just what we seek in this course.

It is not asserted that a course of sacred rhetoric can be made so extensive, or so fruitful of mental and spiritual culture to the student, as some branches of sacred science, which my colleagues teach. But in one respect it may be said to bear an important relation to all your other studies here, not unlike that which Lord Bacon² describes as the *vindemiatio* of inductions. The observation, comparing, classifying of *phenomena* are preparatory; the final inference from the comparison, leading us to the true law of causation, extracts that precious juice for the sake of which solely the clusters have been collected with so much care. In like manner I may claim, that as you come here to be made preachers of the gospel, and as its proclamation from the pulpit is to

¹ Rhetoric: introduc. Cicero de Orat. b. I., c. 14, §§ 63, 64.

² Nov. Organum, lib. II. § 20.

be your prominent task, all other studies are ancillary to this which we now undertake. It is sacred rhetoric which teaches you to apply to the lips of perishing man the expressed wine of all other acquisitions.

I design next, to introduce you into the consideration of our subject by a brief outline of the history of preaching. The gift of speech is the most obvious attribute which distinguishes man from the brutes.¹ To him, language is so important a handmaid of his mind in all its processes, that we remain uncertain how many latent faculties, which we are now prone to deny to the lower animals, may not be lying inactive in them, because of their privation of this *medium*. It is speech which makes us really social beings; without it our instinctive attraction to our fellows would give us, not true society, but the mere gregariousness of the herds. It is by speech that the gulf is bridged over, which insulates each spirit from others. This is the great communicative faculty which establishes a communion between men in each other's experience, reasoning, wisdom and affections. These familiar observations are recalled to your view, in order to suggest how naturally and even necessarily oral address must be employed in the service of religion. If man's religious and social traits

¹ Quinctil., lib. II., c. 16, §§ 16, 17. "Nam. . . opera quædam nobis inimitibilia (qualia sunt cerarum et mellis) efficere, non nullius fortasse rationis est; sed quia (animalia) carent sermone, quæ id faciunt, muta atque irrationalia vocantur. Denique homines quibus negata vox est, quantulum adjuvat animus ille cœlestis? Quare si nihil a diis oratione melius accepimus, quid tam dignum cultu ac labore ducamus, aut in quo malimus præstare hominibus, quam quo ipsi homines cæteris animalibus præstant? eo quidem magis, quod nulla in parte plenius labor gratiam refert."

are regarded, we cannot but expect to find a wise God, from the beginning, consecrate His gift of speech to the end of propagating sacred knowledge and sentiments.

Accordingly, we learn that continuous, oral address has been so used from the earliest ages. In the little that is told us of the antediluvians, we read that God's will was preached among them. "Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of the ungodly."¹ Noah was "a preacher of righteousness."² When we descend to the Hebrew commonwealth we find three orders of official preachers, besides the patriarchal heads of households. On these a constant oral instruction of children was enjoined,³ which probably assumed rather the familiar plainness of homiletical instruction,⁴ than the formality of the sermon. But the prophets were beyond question, if occasional officers of the theocracy, yet public preachers of revealed truth. We read of such discourses from Moses, Aaron (who was both prophet and priest), Isaiah, Elijah, Elisha, Jonah, Jeremiah and the prophets of the restoration. Ezekiel aptly illustrates the responsibilities of his office by that of the watchman set to proclaim the coming of an enemy.⁵ We read also of schools of the prophets, in which youth devoted to God's special service were assembled under the tuition of inspired men, not indeed to learn by rote that divine gift which can only be received by God's sovereign bestowal, but to prepare themselves for it by habits of devotion, and by familiarity with the Scriptures and worship of Israel.

The second order of preachers was the priest's. It

¹ Jude 14.

² 2 Pet. ii. 5.

³ Deut. vi. 7,

⁴ See proper sense of *διδασκω*.

⁵ Ezek. xxxiii.

is clear that his stated duties were not only sacrificial—these occupied but a few weeks of his year—but also pastoral. The priests and Levites, when not employed at the sanctuary, were scattered throughout Israel, and were required to occupy themselves in teaching and preaching. This is intimated in the complaint of Azariah the son of Obed, in the reign of Asa, against their delinquency: “Now for a long season Israel hath been without the true God, and without a teaching priest,” etc.¹ It is more expressly declared by Malachi: “For the priests’ lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.”²

There is some evidence that the theocratic kings also included preaching among their legitimate functions. It may be remarked, in passing, that the early type of Mohammedanism shows how naturally this duty fell in with those of the divinely-appointed ruler. Mohammed, who embodied in his pretensions very accurately certain of the formal ideas of Oriental religion, announced himself as both prophet and theocratic head of his new commonwealth. The latter office was transmitted to his successors, and we find the early khalifs, before the military career of Islam had changed them into mere soldiers, and especially the first of them, Abubeker, constantly preaching in virtue of his position. But this is by the way. One of Solomon’s titles was “preacher,”³ and we have abundant proof in the places cited and others that he was accustomed to exer-

¹ 2 Chron. xv. 3.

² Mal. ii. 7.

³ Eccles i. 1; xii. 9, תִּלְמִיד.

cise this function frequently. We cannot doubt that the same thing was done, at least during the seasons of greatest fidelity to the Hebrew institutions, by Asa, by Hezekiah and by the good Josiah.

But it was under Ezra that preaching assumed, by divine appointment, more nearly its modern place as a constant part of worship, and also its modern character as an exposition of the written Scriptures. This new impulse of the usage was given by the necessities of a great religious revival, and the disuse of the classic Hebrew language by the people as a vernacular tongue. Their seventy years' residence in Chaldea had taught them a modified dialect. Hence the necessity for accompanying the reading of the sacred text with explanations in the popular language. "And Ezra, the priest, brought forth the Law before the congregation. . . . So they read in the book of the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading."¹ We shall seek in vain for a more apt and scriptural definition of the preacher's work than is contained in these words. Henceforth, as the Jewish antiquaries tell us, expository preaching prevailed as a regular exercise, following the reading of the Scriptures in the services of the synagogues. You are too familiar with that usage to need detailed accounts of it. The hints contained in the Gospels themselves² show that it was not the exclusive function of the "ruler of the synagogue," but at his invitation was performed by any learned and competent worshipper; that it was founded usually upon the lessons of the day, and that

¹ Neh. viii. 1-8. ² Luke iv. 16; Matt. xiii. 54; John xviii. 20.

while the reader stood in reading these passages of the Law and Prophets, he resumed his seat to pronounce his own discourse. The importance of these notices to us is that they show us our Saviour's sanction of preaching, as a part of the divine service, and that they connect the preaching of the old dispensation with that of the new.

The Redeemer, and after Him, the apostles, were constant preachers of the gospel. Whenever they were permitted, they availed themselves of the Sabbath worship and synagogues for this purpose. But they preached everywhere; in the temple-courts, in private houses, in the streets and highways, beside the sea, on the mountains. Preaching was the chief instrument of the Christian missionary and teacher, of whatever rank. "It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe."¹ And it is very plain from the Acts and Epistles, in both their preceptive and narrative parts, that this continued to be a regular part of the public service of all the Christian assemblies.

The literature of the Church which has reached us is extremely scanty until the middle of the second century. But the well-known testimony of Justin Martyr, the letter of Pliny to Trajan, and all the statements of the Fathers disclose to us the uniform continuance of preaching in the Church under its uninspired teachers. The sermons of the primitive pastors were rather expository than textual, usually founded on the portions of the Scripture read—inartificial, warm, and practical, seldom delivered from a manuscript, and often *extempore*.

¹ 1 Cor. i. 21.

As in the synagogue, so in the Christian assemblies, the duty was not confined to the bishops or pastors, but was performed, on their invitation, by the lower clergy, the catechists, and even by learned laymen. When Origen was filling Cæsarea with the fame of his sermons, he was only a lector and catechist.

As the Church gained members and worldly importance, and was able to migrate from the private chambers, where her early worship was held, to lordly temples and *basilicæ*, the style of preaching became more ambitious. The sacred orator, if a bishop, sat in the episcopal chair or throne while he spoke; or else upon the steps of the altar. The people meantime stood during the sermon; for the ancient churches were not furnished with seats. Pulpit eloquence was now cultivated with zeal; and many of the clergy acquired a distinguished fame as orators; among whom, as you know, Ambrose, Chrysostom, and Augustine stand foremost. If we may judge by the printed remains of the sermons of the last named, these Fathers held themselves free from a rule by which the moderns are sometimes mischievously constrained; they did not feel themselves bound to consume a fixed time in their discourses, but stopped when they had finished. Some of Augustine's discourses appear to have occupied six minutes, some sixty. There were still very few discourses read to the assemblies; but they were often written down as delivered, by stenographers; a custom which probably accounts for the existence of most patristic sermons now extant. The privilege of open applause was often claimed by the people, and not seldom granted by the preachers; and as religion became more osten-

tatious and corrupt, churches became scenes of gross disorder.

The approach of the Dark Ages was marked by a decline in preaching. By degrees the incapacity of the clergy led them to substitute homilies provided ready to their hand, for their own sermons ; and then, to usurp the space before assigned to preaching, for the liturgies. Except when an epidemic excitement stirred some popular clerical demagogue to proclaim a crusade or a fast, the public worship included no sermon. Or if a more ambitious priest attempted to display his superiority by this exercise, his subject was superstitious, trivial, or even ludicrous ; the vaunting of the virtues of a relic, the legend of his tutelar saint, the value of the indulgences sold by him, the terrors of purgatory, or the sin and danger of resisting Holy Church and her clergy. One famous preacher, of the age of Philip Augustus of France, exhausted his eloquence against the long points upon the fashionable shoes of the day. Another, of a previous age, debated the grave question whether the gold given by the Magi to the infant Saviour was coined or ingots. Another informed his audience of the edifying inquiry, with what weapon Cain slew his brother.

The great Reformation was emphatically a revival of gospel preaching. All the leading Reformers, whether in Germany, Switzerland, England, or Scotland, were constant preachers, and their sermons were prevalently expository. It is well known to you that Luther's commentary on Galatians, and many of the learned expositions of Calvin, were the fruits of their courses of exegetical sermons. We may assume with safety, that the instrumentality to which the spiritual power of that

great revolution was mainly due, was the restoration of scriptural preaching. In the seventeenth century the Protestant churches of the continent witnessed another change in their pulpits. The preaching, instead of being evangelical, was prevalently polemical and technical, dealing rather in the exposition and defence of church symbols than of God's word. This innovation was soon followed by a decay in the piety of the age, from which the Lutheran churches were partially aroused by the Pietists. The English clergy and the Scotch, under the influence of Moderatism, lapsed into that method of preaching which justified the well-known sarcasm, that their texts were borrowed indeed from Paul, but their sermons from Seneca. Their ambition was to discuss ethics rather than Christianity, and with literary elegance rather than evangelical unction. The result was that benumbing flood of Socinianism, Deism, formality and vice which swept over the Church, until the Methodism of the eighteenth century arose to stay it.

You will not suppose, young gentlemen, that I intend this perfunctory sketch as an intrusion into the field of history. My purpose is only to recall to your minds such an outline of facts as will prepare you to understand the preacher's warrant and function. This review even will convince you that the state of the pulpit may always be taken as an index of that of the Church. Whenever the pulpit is evangelical, the piety of the people is in some degree healthy; a perversion of the pulpit is surely followed by spiritual apostasy in the Church. And it is exceedingly instructive to note, that there are three stages through which preaching has repeatedly passed with the same results. The first is that

in which scriptural truth is faithfully presented in scriptural garb—that is to say, not only are all the doctrines asserted which truly belong to the revealed system of redemption, but they are presented in that dress and connection in which the Holy Spirit has presented them, without seeking any other from human science. This state of the pulpit marks the golden age of the Church. The second is the transition stage. In this the doctrines taught are still those of the Scriptures, but their relations are moulded into conformity with the prevalent human dialectics. God's truth is now shorn of a part of its power over the soul. The third stage is then near, in which not only are the methods and explanations conformed to the philosophy of the day, but the doctrines themselves contradict the truth of the Word. Again and again have the clergy traveled this descending scale, and always with the same disastrous result. The first grade is found in the primitive and in the Reformation churches of the first and the sixteenth centuries. The second grade may be seen in the scholasticism of Clement of Alexandria and his pupils, and in the symbolical discourses with which the continental pulpit echoed during the seventeenth century. The last is found in the Dark Ages and in Rationalism. This cycle is strikingly illustrated also by the history of the New Theology as it is completing itself in our day in America. When the Protestant churches of this country were founded, the ministry had not lost the Reformation impulse, and belonged to the first stage. The generation, unwittingly introduced by the great and good Jonathan Edwards, marks the second; during which the doctrines of grace were not openly impugned,

but they were successively stretched into the schemes of metaphysics—the “exercise scheme,” the “light scheme,” the “greatest benevolence scheme”—which fascinated a people of narrow and partial culture and self-confident temper. The next generation was called to witness the apostasy which turned the truth of God into a lie, and took both the methods and the dogmas of the Socinian and the Pelagian. Let us, my brethren, eschew the ill-starred ambition which seeks to make the body of God’s truth a “lay figure” on which to parade the drapery of human philosophy. May we ever be content to exhibit Bible doctrine in its own Bible dress!