

## LECTURE X.

### CONSTITUENT MEMBERS OF THE SERMON.—CONTINUED.

#### EXPLICATION AND PROPOSITION.

UNLESS *explication* of the text has composed the *exordium* (which I have admitted to be sometimes proper), this will be the second constituent member of the regular sermon. The peculiar character of sacred eloquence gives us an explication in place of a *narration*, which the classic orators made their second member.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in the sermon, this part will not seldom assume the form of narration, when the passage of Scripture to be explained presents us with an incident or a history. The reason which requires a narration before the main argument of the advocate is very plain and conclusive; the hearer must be put in possession of the facts of the case before he is ready to comprehend the discussion of that issue. Teachers of forensic eloquence have often remarked, that the issue may be virtually decided by the skilful advocate through the structure of his narration. He so states the events, with perspicuous brevity

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<sup>1</sup> See citations on p. 146. *Vinet* (Skinner's translation, p. 154) says: "A sermon, whatever may be its kind, resolves itself always into a demonstration, and a demonstration never has place without a formal or indirect explanation. I mean to say, that every demonstration rests upon a foregoing explanation."

and graphic force, as to charm the interest of the listener. He connects facts so as to place in a strong light those which are favourable to his claim, and to withdraw into the shade those which are adverse. Like the consummate general, he secures his victory in advance of the actual shock of arms by the method in which he takes his positions. Thus the narrative often becomes the most important member of his discourse.

The same general reason demands an explication in the sermon before the main argument. The hearer should be clearly possessed of the point to be proven before he advances to the proof. But there is a more imperative reason, growing out of the posture and function of the Protestant teacher. It is the boast of our Christianity that it recognizes in the laity the right of private judgment. The minister is not a hierarch to dictate dogmas to the implicit faith of subject souls whose "ignorance is the mother of their devotion." We "have not dominion over their faith, but are helpers of their joy, for by faith they stand."<sup>1</sup> Unless their faith is intelligent, it is nothing worth. Unless they see evidence to command assent in the light of their own understandings, they do not really see at all; their souls are still in darkness. A second truth equally plain is, that the meaning which they place upon the word is to them the substance of the word. The laity, therefore, are entitled to have something more than the mere assertion of their teacher to connect the meaning which they are required to accept from a given passage

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<sup>1</sup> See 2 Cor. i. 24; also, Matt. xxiii. 10, 11; 1 John iv. 1, 2, 3; John viii. 32.

of Scripture with its terms. You have seen that it is the peculiarity of the sermon that it impels the hearer's will with the direct authority of God, and not merely with human reasons and inducements. That your discourse may be a true sermon, then, its proposition must be deduced from the language of its text by an exegesis, which shall give your hearer's mind convincing evidence the meaning you propound is indeed God's intended meaning. It thus appears that the sermon cannot usually exist without explication of the text. There may be cases where its words are so plain and unambiguous that your view of their meaning, without any reasoning, appears conclusive. In these cases the explication contracts itself into a self-evident statement, but it is still present in rudiment, and it is the necessary tie between the hearer's conscience and the authority of the divine word in the text.

It also results from these considerations that the object of the explication is both to define and to evince: it must not only make plain what you apprehend the meaning of the text to be, but it must also show why you apprehend it to be such. It will often include, therefore, *definition*<sup>1</sup> and *discussion*.

Your knowledge of logic will furnish you with the technical meaning of definition, as a description of an

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<sup>1</sup> Thus, if the text were Ps. lxxxiv. 11, "*No good thing* will he withhold from them that walk uprightly," the nature of the good here promised must be defined, or else the proposition cannot be sustained that God bestows all good upon his true servants. If, for instance, it were natural good which was intended, the proposition would not be true. The other branch of the explication of this text will then be to show exegetical reasons that your definition is indeed the one intended by the sacred writer.

object by *genus* and *differentia*. The more comprehensive and popular notion of a definition, as a set of terms which so describe an object as to distinguish it from all others, is more suitable to the use of the rhetorician. The preacher should be chary of technical definitions:<sup>1</sup> they suppose in the hearer a power of abstraction which is seldom cultivated, and they are more likely to confuse than to enlighten the common people. But when it is necessary to define, he should give a truly essential definition, and should not delude the hearer's mind by one merely nominal, substituting a phrase for a phrase, while the one is no more discriminative than the other. Thus, it is no adequate definition of "atonement" to say that it is "satisfaction," or that satisfaction is atonement, unless the hearer is instructed of the nature of the compensation intended by the word, as that of penal obligation. But when you say that "atonement" is compensation of our penal debt to God, by the actual punishment of our Substitute, you give us an essential definition: the idea of atonement is thenceforward distinctly separated in our minds. A nominal definition (the explanation of a term by a term) is only useful when the second term is better known by usage than the former, and that in a defined sense. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> Cicero de Orat., L. ii. c. 25, §§ 108, 109. "Atque in hoc genere causarum nonnulli præcipiunt, ut verbum illud, quod causam facit, lucide, absolute, breviter uterque definiat. Quod mihi quidem perquam puerile videri solet. . . . Etenim definitio primum reprehenso verbo uno, aut addito, aut dempto, sæpe extorquetur e manibus: deinde genere ipso doctrinam redolet exercitationemque pæne puerilem: tum et in sensum et in mentem iudicis intrare non potest. Ante enim præterlabitur, quam percepta est."

the "Decalogue" may be defined as the "Ten Commandments," because popular usage has given the latter phrase a particular meaning. I add a further precept, that the preacher should never attempt to define things already known or ideas absolutely simple. The natural relation of father and child, for instance, is already better known by experience than it can be by definition; and the idea of "truth," being simple and incapable of further analysis into other elements, cannot be better expressed than by the word "truth." To define in these cases is to waste words and to mar the movement of the discourse. Again, definition in discourse must always be brief; if protracted, it disappoints its own object, by overloading the attention and memory of the hearer. I remark again: sentiments and moral ideas are often better defined by a concrete illustration than by abstract terms. They may be represented in historical events selected from the Scriptures, or painted in a parable of our Lord, or suggested by some past or some possible experience of the hearer, in which the idea in question was exactly reproduced. Thus, when the lawyer of Luke x. 29 required of our Saviour to define who was his neighbour, his answer was the parable of the "Good Samaritan." He thus gave his questioner what was far more vivid, more interesting, and even more exact, than an abstract conception of the relation—a realization of it to himself in his own consciousness. It is the duty of the minister to study the means and cultivate the faculty of concrete definition after this beautiful model; for it is thus the people are to be successfully taught. Once more: the

business of definition should always be so completed during the explication of the topic that, when the proposition of the sermon is finally announced, every term in it shall be plain. No further explanation should be needed or admitted, but the preacher should be ready to advance at once to his argument.

The other branch of the explication is that which evinces the correctness of the definition or interpretation assigned to the text. In ascertaining and establishing this, the preacher must faithfully employ all the critical and exegetical aids within his reach. It is not proper that I should here usurp the place of the teacher of interpretation, but supposing you to have profited by his instructions, I would give you some rhetorical guidance in their use before the people.

And, first: a strict integrity of mind should guide you in the selection and use of a passage of the Scriptures as a text. Never venture to expound it to the people, unless you are sure that you have the meaning intended by the Spirit, and offer to them no other than that. You should feel that in your sermon you have no concern with any other meaning than that which God has placed in the words, and if this does not suit your purpose do not dare to employ them as a text. It is never lawful for you first to select a topic and a method for discussion, and then to warp or strain a passage by accommodation, or any other exegetical expedient to cover it. The guilt of thus thrusting words upon God is that of presumption, if not of profanity. The detection of your license in the treatment of the Scriptures would teach your hearers to regard you, or the word of God, or both, with mistrust. Would you

teach them to revere the authority of that word? Show them that you yourself revere it.

Second. The explication of the passage on which you preach should be plain and convincing. In this part of his task it behoves the preacher to show the hand of a master workman. He should so establish the view of the meaning which he has adopted after careful deliberation, as to extinguish doubt and cavil in every attentive mind, and to commend his opinion conclusively to his hearers. And this should be done with an air of solid good sense rather than of scholastic nicety. The Bible should be approached as a popular book, and not as a learned riddle; a book given by God to the common people; a book which, while it contains unfathomable depths of wisdom and knowledge, yields its instructions, on all truth fundamental to salvation, to every honest and earnest searcher. The manner of the expounder should seem to say to his hearers: "These Scriptures do not indeed disclose their treasures to heedless indolence and shallow inattention, but they offer them to the faithful inquiry of every plain mind. Come with me, and we shall by prayer and carefulness find the undoubted meaning of the Spirit." But, on the other hand, the preacher should not flatter his people by intimating to them that they are as competent as he to expound the Word, nor should he permit them to depreciate learning and ability as valuable helps in the task. If your people were indeed as able as you are to explain it, this would only prove that you are not fit for your place. The spiritual teacher should in this matter "magnify his office," not by pretentious displays, but by solid ability and mastery of the Scriptures.

Third. Avoid especially in this exercise every trait of pedantry and of literary coxcomhry. You should not readily choose a text which requires a learned and laboured exegesis to evince its meaning, but should rather resort to some plainer declaration of the same truth in another part of the Scriptures. The judicious expositor, while he will not be servile in his adherence to established interpretations, will never hunt for novel and startling senses in his text. He is more likely, by such crotchets, to establish a character for conceit than for originality or true learning. The sensible hearer will justly regard the unnecessary reference to learned authors, the citation of the original languages, the employment of the technicalities of hermeneutics, the quoting of erroneous explanations for the purpose of refuting them, as designed to display yourselves rather than the truth; for his good sense will remind him that none of these are really necessary to the unfolding of the meaning of the Word. The able expounder exhibits not the processes, but the results, of his learning. He employs indeed every aid of literature to ascertain the exact mind of the Spirit. But when he presents his view of that meaning to the people, he relies not so much on these minute rays of evidence as on the broad light of its consistency as a whole, and its harmony with the sacred writer's scope, and with the analogy of faith, to evince its justice to the people. The processes of learned criticism are the scaffoldings which assist in building the house; when it is completed these may be pulled away, for the structure will stand upon its own foundations and disclose the justness of its own proportions. Let me here commend to you, as of prime value for the

popular exposition of the Word, those historical explanations which place the hearers in the precise point of view occupied by the sacred writer and his first readers, and which thus enable them to appreciate his scope. Introduce your explanations by a brief, lucid, archæological statement in popular form, and substantiated as far as possible by facts given in the Scriptures themselves; you will find this shed a flood of self-evidencing light over the whole passage, which will supersede the necessity for a dissecting verbal criticism. Is it your task, for instance, to expound the doctrinal parts of the Epistle to the Colossians? Explain to the people that the apostle was moved to write it by the following facts: He had just learned in his prison at Rome, that the Colossian church was infested with a type of pharisaic Gnosticism, which proposed a combination of Jewish asceticism with a reliance on the mediation and teaching of supposed super-angelic spirits, as the way of salvation. You may prove that this statement is historically true by the very words of St. Paul himself (chap. ii. 16, 18), without the seeming pedantry of citing uninspired antiquaries. This cause of the apostle's writing at once manifests the scope of his reasoning, and gives us the key to his masterly argument against the attempt to add any creature mediation to Christ's headship and intercession, and any will-worship or asceticism to his righteousness. A plain, historical disclosure of the author's scope is always the best popular exposition.

The most reprehensible pedantry of all is that which delights in criticising and amending the received English version. Instead of seeking for opportunities to

point out errors in this precious work of our ancestors, its credit should be carefully sustained before the people, whenever this can be done without an actual sacrifice of our integrity and of the truth of the text. The general excellence of the translation merits this treatment. Such were the learning and labour of its authors, that he who is most deeply acquainted with sacred criticism will be found most modest in assailing their accuracy in any point. But it is far more important to remark, that this version is practically the Bible of the common people—the only one to which they can have familiar access. If their confidence in its fidelity is overthrown, they are virtually robbed of the written word of God. Hence, if to bring out the truth of your text, a correction must needs be made in the phraseology of this version, let it be made in such a way as not to impair its credit. If there be actual error, let it not be causelessly paraded. In most cases, the seeming inaccuracy may be explained by the fact, that in the transition of our own tongue, the English phrase has undergone a change since the translators (correctly) employed it. Thus when they say, as the translation of *Μη μεριμνᾶτε*, etc. (Matt. vi. 25), “Take no thought for your life,” they are entitled to be delivered from their seeming contradiction of the other Scriptures, which command rational forecast, by this explanation, that the word “thought” then bore, as one of its common senses, the meaning of “morbid anxiety,” which has since become obsolete. Let them have all the advantage of such just explanations. Thus let the confidence of your hearers in their English Bibles be preserved and fortified.

In conclusion: the explication will usually demand

the best exertion of the preacher's skill, because it is necessary that the qualities above claimed for it be combined with brevity. It must not be protracted, because, important as it is, it is not usually the body of the sermon, but is introductory thereto. If you allow this preliminary to detain you from the main argument, the hearer will feel that you are dallying with your work. The grace and *momentum* of the discourse will be lost, and weariness will supervene. There are, however, many expository sermons, where a continuous explication, interspersed with reflections and applications, may properly form the body of the discourse; in other cases the explication should be short.

The third member of the regular sermon is the *proposition*. To this the preacher will be immediately led by his explication. It states explicitly what is the precise subject or assertion which the preacher designs to discuss. This is a very short, but a very essential member of the structure. It should be expressed, if possible, in a single sentence, and that of the simplest possible syntax, with the most definite terms. The statement should be such as to leave no necessity, after the explication which has preceded it, for any further definitions or limitations. Every word and every connexion of the words in this statement must be pondered with care; and whatever other parts of the sermon may be left to find their expression at the moment of utterance, this should be enunciated in the very words prepared beforehand. Such a propounding of the main subject of discourse at the outset of the main argument is demanded by this plain reason, that if you wish the people

to understand what you say, you must inform them in advance about what you purpose to talk. Such an announcement is at once the necessary key to comprehension, and the clue of connexion for all that follows. The rule is therefore uniform and imperative.

Touching the manner of propounding, I have already said that the terms must be brief and absolutely perspicuous. We sometimes hear preachers announce their topics in sentences so tedious and involved, so overloaded with explanations and repetitions, so varied into forms of expression supposed to be equivalent, that at the end, the hearers are more in the dark concerning the subject of the coming discussion, than when the text was announced. If the text is itself a single proposition, and is perspicuous, it may be recited as the announcement. A second observation which I would commend to you is, that some simple means should be used to arrest the attention of all the hearers when you are about to announce your proposition, and to advertise them that you are now proceeding to this cardinal step. This may be effected by a significant pause, by an emphatic repetition of the propounding sentence, or by a cautionary preface, following the end of the explication, in some such words as these: "The following, then, my brethren, appears to be the doctrine of the text;" or, "This explication of the text shows, that it asserts the following proposition, viz." In a word, the preacher, upon pronouncing his proposition, should examine the countenances of his hearers, and be sure that he has their understandings as well as their eyes. If he perceives that a part of them are either inattentive or confused and doubtful of his real intent, he should not

proceed until, by suitable repetitions, he has possessed every mind of his purposed object.

My third remark is, that the topic of discussion may be propounded either as a subject or as a logical proposition. I here use the last word in its technical sense, as a sentence which, by means of the copula, affirms or denies some predicate of some subject. Let us suppose that the text is a single verse, 1 John iii. 3: "And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure." After the explication, which by the help of the context, will plainly and convincingly show that the "hope" intended is that of redemption through Christ, that the "purifying" is that of spiritual sanctification, and that the person who is its pattern is the Redeemer, you may then deduce your topic either as a subject of didactic and illustrative remarks, "The sanctifying effect of the true believer's hope," or as a proposition to be demonstrated, "The believer's hope sanctifies all who are entitled to it." Let us suppose, again, that the sermon is an expository one, and discusses a longer passage of Scripture, in which a kindred truth is taught. Titus ii. 9 to chap. iii. 8. After such preliminary explanation of the scope and language as introduces the hearer to the leading idea of the passage, this may be deduced either as a subject, "The connection of the faith and the life," which will then be exemplified by a detailed examination of the verses; or it may be stated as a proposition, "The true believer will be careful to maintain good works," which will then be proved by the arguments the apostle furnishes, and will be applied to his instances. The logical proposition is usually the safer form for the young preacher, because

it is more exact, and compels him to a convergent discussion. When defining and urging unity in discourse, I reminded you that a series of remarks might be seemingly connected by their reference to one subject, which were each one true and edifying, and yet might be as divergent as the radii issuing from a common centre. The preacher who is in danger of thus sinning against unity will protect himself by throwing his topic into the form of a proposition, and his discussion into that of a demonstration; for if he argues the affirmation of his predicate, all the parts of his proof must converge on the one copula. Some preachers, however, have the faculty of instructive didactic remark. They discuss their point, not so much in the form of a set demonstration, as of a series of explanations and instances. Their skill avoids the perversion of their flexibility of method into a real breach of unity. They are less formal, but not really less argumentative, than the avowed logician. And before some audiences there is even an advantage in the absence of technical forms of argumentation; for the display of these provokes some tempers to assume a mental attitude of resistance.