

LECTURE XI.

CONSTITUENT MEMBERS OF DISCOURSE.—CONTINUED.

ARGUMENT AND CONCLUSION.

THE fourth and most extended member of the regular sermon is the *Argument*. This indeed constitutes the main body of the discourse. I have already said, more than once, that it may often consist of a didactic discussion, which is not a formal demonstration. It may be a convergent series of illustrative or explanatory remarks. It may be a series of historical instances. Yet, as the intent is always demonstrative, and as the affirmation of resemblance in each illustration or instance is usually a brief tract of demonstration, the name of "Argument" is not inappropriate to this *main* discussion, in any case. As this is what constitutes the body of the sermon, the consideration of it must be extended and important. The larger part of all that falls under the head of "*Disposition*" will obviously pertain to this topic. I therefore postpone the farther treatment of it until our synoptic view of the constituent members of discourse is completed, lest I should be led to separate the remaining one too widely from the first four.

This last member is, of course, the "*Conclusion.*" The reasons for its introduction correspond to those

which required an *exordium*. As the approach to the main subject without any preparation would be abrupt and unskilful, so to relinquish it without conclusion would be awkward and incomplete. As a transition stage of sentiment was found necessary to raise the hearer, from his ordinary apathy, to the tone of the sacred truth to be discussed, so a transition is desirable, to consign him to the state of sacred meditation and conviction in which the sermon is designed to result. Again: the aim of all rhetorical discourse is to produce a practical determination of the hearer's will. To this end, the truths discussed should be so applied, after they have been explained and demonstrated, as to connect the force of the whole in one effect. "A threefold cord is not quickly broken." Each several head of discussion may be likened to one strand. It is the conclusion which twines them all together, combining their strength and drawing the convinced hearer irresistibly to his duty. The separate branches of argument are the parallel rays of the sun of truth; the conclusion is the lens which refracts them into one burning focus. Once more: these several parts of the argument must be presented by the speaker, and considered by the hearers, singly in detail; for to mingle the discussion of them together could result only in confusion and obscurity. The preacher must lay aside the first in order to take up the second head; he dismisses the second in order to introduce the third. He must, in a certain degree, call his hearers away from the previous point to attend to the one in hand: he must require them temporarily to exclude it, in order to give full attention to the next. If, then, there were no con-

clusion, the branch of argument treated last would occupy an undue place before the mind of the hearer, and the force of the previous ones would be partly lost. Hence the necessity of going back, either by a formal or a virtual recapitulation, to suggest again all the heads of discussion which had been temporarily dismissed, and to deliver their cumulative weight upon the souls of the people. In a word, it is by means of the conclusion that the unity of the discourse evinces itself.

There may indeed be, especially in expository sermons, a continuous application where each topic is addressed to the conscience as soon as the exposition develops it. In such cases the final conclusion will be shorter, because the work of application has been already in part done. But even here a general conclusion will usually be best, to gather up the collective effect of the whole; because the partial applications made in the current of the discourse will be of special parts of the truth to special ends.

The conclusion may be one of five kinds. The first is formed by introducing the more general truth under which the proposition of the sermon is comprehended. This particular truth is thus made a stepping-stone for ascending to some higher and wider point of view, whence a more impressive prospect is seen of the importance and the relations of the duty to which the text tends. The subject of discourse may be, for instance, God's special providence. This will be defined, and then, in the main discussion, demonstrated. The preacher may then, in his conclusion, show that the denial of this doctrine is practically equivalent to

atheism, since it seeks to exclude God from all actual, effective concern with his creatures, and makes such duties as those of reverence, faith, prayer, as unreasonable as would the actual demonstration that there is no God. Thus, any appeal to the conscience, which the preacher might desire to ground upon his proof of the doctrine of providence, would derive more solemnity and weight, since he could justly urge that disobedience in that particular was connected, by implication, with the enormity of the crime of atheism.

There may be a second form of conclusion, where an idea is introduced which, while single and particular, bears to all the heads of the sermon the relation of a representative epitome or summary. This is not identical with the first. The concluding thought may be a proposition into which the proposition of the text may be transmuted (as the detailed discussion will have evinced), and which will set the text in a more striking and practical light. Or else it may be a final head of argument, which, while most definite and pungent of all, will be seen to contain the previous ones by implication in itself. For example, let the text be John v. 40: "And ye will not come unto me that ye might have life;" the doctrine of which is, that the sinner's own perverse will is the practical obstacle to his salvation. This may be argued in detail by such points as these: The sufficiency of Christ's satisfaction and renewing grace for all men, and the sincerity of the gospel offer to all: The fact that no sinful being can effectually obstruct the sinner's coming, if he is himself willing, and that no holy being desires to do so: The nature of the sinner's inability as having its roots in a per-

verted will. The conclusion may then urge, as a final and most practical argument, virtually inclusive of all the preceding, that such is the nature of true faith and repentance, he who truly wishes to exercise them (his rudimental knowledge of the gospel being supposed) does in that wish begin to exercise them. Thence the preacher may urge upon each sinner's will the direct and immediate issue of consenting to a present salvation or rejecting it.

A third kind of conclusion may be found appropriate in doctrinal and didactic discourses, which consists of inferences or corollaries. The fruit of a discussion is thus well gleaned. There is an indirect but most pleasing confirmation of the proposition of the text, when its harmony with other truths is thus evinced. But these concluding corollaries should be chosen under the guidance of a severe taste and judgment. Since the theology of redemption is a system connected throughout, and every truth is related directly or remotely to every other, if full license were taken to introduce all possible corollaries, one might begin from one head of divinity and infer all the rest. The inferences deduced should, therefore, be near and conclusive, they should be grave and practical, and they should be such as will not forsake, but preserve and promote, the dominant scope of the sermon.

The fourth kind of conclusion is the recapitulation. This was the favourite form of the peroration or epilogue among the classical orators. It consists in a brief and weighty recital of the points already argued, terminating in the emphatic announcement of the main proposition first asserted. This recapitulation must be

brief, lest it should weary the hearer as an idle repetition. It must be, while the same in logical *substance*, new in statement, or in the phase of presentation; for the orator should not sensibly repeat even himself.¹ It should surpass the previous discourse (not necessarily in loudness, but) in movement, force and animation. Thus the weight of the arguments is gathered up and delivered with cumulative effect. A good recapitulation is also the best expedient for fixing in the hearer's memory the plan of the discussion. If this is presented to him at the beginning of the argument, he will apprehend it as dry, vague and burdensome. Such a recital of heads to be discussed is indeed a "skeleton" of the coming discourse; it gives only the meagre bones, sapless and undeveloped. But the repetition, even if it be brief, following a full discussion, will suggest the several members of the discourse as the hearer has just seen them in the plastic hand of the orator, defined in their full dimensions, clothed with flesh and colouring, and instinct with vital warmth.

¹ Quintilian, L. vi., c. i., § 2. "Rerum repetitio et congregatio, quæ Græce dicitur *ανακεφαλαιωσις*, a quibusdam Latinorum *enumeratio*, et memoriam judicis reficit, et totam simul causam ponit ante oculos; et, etiamsi per singula minus movebant, turba valet. In hac, quæ repetimus quam brevissime dicenda sunt, et quod Græco verbo patet, decurrenda per capita. Nam si morabimur, non jam enumeratio, sed quasi altera fiet oratio. Quæ autem enumeranda videntur, et cuu pondere aliquo dicenda sunt, et aptis excitanda sentiis, et figuris utique varianda; alioqui nihil est odiosius recta illa repetitione, velut memoriæ judicium diffidentis."

A comparison of any of Cicero's perorations with the main argument will show how skilfully he complies with the last maxim. While he recapitulates the same points, it is always in new lights.

The fifth species of conclusion is the practical application. This is the most appropriate termination for the ethical or practical sermon; but it is not unsuitable for the doctrinal, as is clear from the maxim, that doctrines should be preached practically as well as duties doctrinally. The object of the application is to bring the truth which has been established in the discussion to bear immediately upon the conscience and will. Since every rhetorical discourse aims at a practical determination of the hearer's will, it is obvious that this species of conclusion is in the strictest accordance with the design of eloquence.

The application may be either general or special. The former is one which urges a principle of duty concerning all classes of hearers alike. Thus, the truth that we "know neither the day nor the hour when the Son of man cometh" results in the application, "Watch therefore"—an injunction suitable alike to believer and unbeliever. The special application is that which separates the hearers into classes and directs the truth to their several consciences, in the particular phase appropriate to each. The advantage of this method is, that it singles out the hearer more closely, and brings the truth into more immediate contact with his heart. Definiteness is the necessary condition of pungent effect. Yet the subdivision of your audience into classes must not be carried too far, lest the multiplicity of your heads of application should render the discourse technical, tedious and dry, just where the unction and movement should be greatest.

Having mentioned the different kinds of conclusions, I would add some remarks applicable to them all.

When I grouped them, as to their matter, in five classes, I did not intend to be understood as forbidding the employment of a conclusion which might belong to two of these at once. For example, the peroration may be both a summary and an application. Indeed, whatever may be the matter of the epilogue, it should always be a virtual application. I would urge that the conclusion be always the subject of careful preparation. It is no less important that our last impression be a good one than our first. The practical sense which the hearer entertains of the effect and force of the sermon is that which is left upon his soul at its termination. "He is the conqueror who remains master of the battle-field."¹ Nothing can be more faulty than to leave the conclusion to the accidental suggestions of the moment. The speaker is then exhausted; he has expended his store of thoughts; he feels that while he is not willing to sit down he virtually has nothing more to say; he beats the air with empty declamation; he wears away the impression of the truths already unfolded, by their bald repetition; he endeavours to cover his retreat by noise. But the peroration, of all the parts of the discourse, should be the most sharply defined, the most trenchant, the most perspicuous, the most convergent. It would be a far smaller fault to break off, leaving the sermon a fragment, than to mar the impression already made by vague commonplaces or useless repetitions. Let not this critical part of discourse be left to the inspiration of chance.

But while an idle repetition, which gives nothing

¹ *Vinet*, Homiletics.

new to the expression of the thought, should be avoided, it would be a flagrant sin against unity to introduce foreign matter in the conclusion. The leading scope of the discourse must still prevail to the very close, even more strictly than in the midst of the discussion. The thoughts and images which compose the termination, while not identical with those already uttered, must be such as will carry forward both the same subject and the same impression.

All writers on eloquence, ancient and modern, seem to have concurred in the opinion that the peroration should excel in persuasion. You will be hereafter more distinctly instructed in the nature and means of this part of rhetoric, but you doubtless already comprehend that we mean by persuasion, as distinguished from argument, those appeals which are aimed directly at the heart. In the conclusion, if anywhere, the religious affections should be touched. The power of moral painting must now be invoked. The preacher's soul should here show itself fired with the force of the truth which has been developed, and glowing both with light and heat. The quality of unction should suffuse the end of your discourse, and bathe the truth in evangelical emotion. But this emotion must be genuine and not assumed; it must be spiritual, the zeal of heavenly love, and not the carnal heat of the mental gymnastic and *gaudium certaminis*. It must disclose itself spontaneously and unannounced, as the gushing of a fountain which will not be suppressed. What can give this glow except the indwelling of the Holy Ghost? You are thus led again to that great, ever-recurring deduction, the first qualification of the sacred orator, the grace of Christ. This

demand for progressive animation and unction cannot be met by a mechanical and calculated increase of voice and gesticulation. When the preacher, who is not really penetrated in his own soul by the light and heat of the divine truth which he wields, begins to foreshadow the approaching end by the stale artifice of buffeting the cushion of his pulpit and the ears of his audience, every sensible person is wearied and repelled instead of being impressed.¹ He instinctively sets himself to resist being taken by storm by so deceitful an assault, instead of being swept along a willing captive to the preacher's light and love. Nor is a true fervour necessarily expressed always by increased loudness and force of gesture. The peroration may sometimes be less vehement than the previous discussion. A calm, solemn and earnest strain may impress the heart and conscience more than that which is animated and bold. The most profound convictions are often too deep to show an agitated surface. The discourse must be like a river which never ceases its motion toward the sea. But the stream which, where it is a rivulet amidst its native mountains, brawls and foams against the immovable rocks, at last disembogues itself calmly with its mighty volume of waters into the ocean. At the end it does not move with less force, but it moves without agitation, because its resistless current has swept every obstacle from its channel.

The last and perhaps the most important maxim for the peroration is that so tersely expressed by the words, *Ne nimis*. The preacher should restrict the length of

¹ The youths of the university described this by the coarse but expressive phrase, "Piling on the agony at the close."

his conclusion with a severe and jealous hand. Its object is only to place the truth which has been explained or proved in contact with the heart and conscience. Every word which exceeds this is an excrescence. When once the truth has found full access to the hearer's soul, the best possible thing to be done is to leave it there performing its own work. Protracting the discourse beyond this point only undoes what has been already effected. One object of the conclusion is to awaken emotion. Remember that vehement affections are never long sustained.¹ When the conviction has once invested itself with strong feeling in the soul of the auditor, that is the propitious moment to dismiss him to his own meditations. If he is then detained, the emotion will speedily subside, and with it the impression. The most important thing, therefore, is that you know when to stop, and that you be sure to stop when you have done.²

¹ Quintil., L. vi., c. i., § 27, 28. "Nec sine causa dictum est; 'Nihil facilius quam lacrimas imarescere.' Nam, quum etiam veros dolores mitiget tempus, citius evanescat necesse est illa, quam dicendo effinximus, imago; in qua si moramur, lacrimis fatigatur auditor, et requiescit, et ab illo quem ceperat impetu, ad rationem redit. 29. Non patiamur igitur frigescere hoc opus, et affectum quum ad summum perduximus, relinquamus; nec speremus fore, ut aliena quisquam diu ploret. Ideoque quum in aliis, tum maxime in hac parte, debet crescere oratio; quia quicquid noui adjicit prioribus, etiam detrudere videtur; *et facile deficit affectus qui descendit.*"

² A shrewd and caustic Frenchman once uttered the following criticism upon the vice against which I warn you. If the image is homely, the sarcasm is not more biting than the folly deserves: "Your American orator is very ingenious and fluent, but his conclusion is too much like that of the pointer dog, who when he wishes to sleep turns around and around, following his own tail, and at last lies down just where he began."