

## LECTURE XIV.

### *RULES OF ARGUMENT.—CONTINUED.*

**R**ESUMING the same subject, I remark, in the seventh place, that the arguments should follow each other in a natural and progressive order. They must be so arranged that the mind of the hearer will pass from the first to the second and thence to the third with ease, and that the effect of the whole shall be cumulative. The maxim which you will find in most books of rhetoric is, that we begin with the weakest argument and proceed thence to the strongest, in order to secure a climax. Whateley objects to this, that it is injudicious to advance the least impressive point first, because by so doing we risk making a bad first impression. The hearer, he thinks, will be likely to conclude that it is a trivial cause which is introduced by a trivial reason. He therefore advises that the discussion be opened with some obvious and forcible argument, that the weaker pleas be thrown into the middle, and that the remaining strong points be introduced last, to prevent anti-climax. There is, it must be admitted, some force in the objection which Whateley advances.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cicero de Orat., L. ii., c. 77, §§ 313, 314. "Atque etiam in illo reprehendo eos, qui, quæ minime firma sunt, ea prima collocant. In quo illos quoque errare arbitror, qui, si quando (id quod mihi nun-

But if the old rule be modified in the following respects, I think it may be retained. Let no point of argument be elevated into a separate head of the discussion, at any stage of it, which is feeble enough to incur the risk of a trivial first impression. Such proofs, if noticed at all, should be compressed into a subordinate position. The impressiveness of respective heads of argument should be estimated relatively, not to the speaker's, but to the hearer's mind, as it apprehends them after they have been expanded. The professional man's habitudes of thought are likely to differ from those of the common people; whence a view that seems most weighty to the preacher may be felt by them as less impressive, even after his presentation of it. If now he places this last, he will depreciate instead of enhancing the final impressions, for it is in the people's minds that impression is sought to be made: he is not speaking to convince himself.

Some have urged that the right solution of these questions of order would be to select your strongest argument and stake the issue on that alone. They say that one good evidence is convincing, and the preacher of Christianity should never use a bad one. They ob-

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*quam placuit) plures adhibent patronos, ut in quoque eorum minimum putant esse, ita eum primum volunt dicere. Res enim hoc postulat, ut eorum expectationi qui audiunt, quam celerrime occurratur; cui si initio non satisfactum sit, multo plus sit in reliqua caussa laborandum. Male enim se res habet, quæ non statim ut dici cæptum est, melior fieri videtur. Ergo ut in oratore optimus quisque, sic et in oratione firmissimum quodque sit primum; dum illud tamen in quoque teneatur, ut ea quæ excellent serventur etiam ad perorandum. Si quæ erunt mediocra (nam vitiosis nusquam oportet esse locum) in mediam turbam atque in gregem conjiciantur."*

ject that the solicitude to add a second and a third betrays a consciousness of the unsoundness of the first. This plan would have more plausibility if your audience consisted of a single man; but you preach to many at once. You know that the constitutions of different minds are various; so that a point which is effective with one may be powerless with another. The engineer who fires at a crowd loads his artillery with a number of grape-shot, not with a single ball. But I claim also that a second argument is not felt by any mind to be useless because a first has been found convincing. It confirms the evidence already seen, and guarantees us that its seeming force is not sophistical: it instructs us in the most pleasing manner in the harmonies and relationships of truths.

The testimony of Scripture is our most weighty evidence. Where, then, should the proof-texts be ranked? In many cases you will find that the declaration of a particular citation is related to some one head of your argument: this text should then be cited at the conclusion of this head. In other cases it would appear proper to place the chief array of texts at the close of the discussion, that they may have the honour of terminating debate. It seems inconsistent to continue human arguments after God's final verdict is announced.

8. Last, the preacher should see to it that his proof is unanswerable. Nothing should be advanced which is not solid, and all should be so perspicuously and forcibly put as to silence every mind which is not perverse. While every public speaker must be prompted to speak convincingly by whatever motive causes him to speak at all, this force is demanded of the preacher

by a more solemn obligation. It is God's truth which he advocates. It is a system which claims infallible certainty. Common hearers are apt to suspect that an inconclusive argument betrays an inconclusive proposition; for this, although not a just, is a most natural, inference. The result of sophistical preaching is to make Christianity seem sophistical. He is no small criminal who, by his indolence or heedlessness, occasions this profane deduction. Hence the preacher should be, as a logician, intensely honest. It is his sacred duty to practice the most painstaking care in constructing his arguments, and to be sure that he sees all around his points before he ventures them. You find here an additional reason against logical novelties and long-drawn ratiocination in the pulpit. No man can safely risk their multiplied occasions of fallacy. We should restrain ourselves within those solid grounds where we can be certain of our correctness; we should rely upon those broad and strong views of truth which are grasped firmly by the common mind. To secure this honesty, your study should be accompanied with much prayer, that the infirmities and uncertainties of the human understanding may be guided from on high.

Polemic argumentation is somewhat peculiar in its circumstances. All logical discussion may be regarded as indirectly polemical, for whenever we establish a true proposition we thereby virtually refute the opposite error. This method is called indeed indirect refutation. And this, let me say once for all, is usually the wisest, safest and most effectual mode of pastoral opposition against heresy. The minds of your people should be so filled in advance with the truth, that there will be

no room for an enemy to inject an error. A controversial tone in the pulpit is usually to be avoided, and the habit of throwing your arguments into the form of a logical combat with an imaginary opponent is most unfortunate. The tone of the pastoral instructor should usually be didactic; his attitude is that of the father instructing docile children. But there are occasions when he must refute error directly. In his doctrinal sermons he must often meet known and aggressive objections which place themselves across the path of the truths he is asserting. There may be instances (of the occurrence of which your pastoral theology will decide rather than your rhetoric) when it will be your duty to make a formal warfare against some heresy. Since all reasoning is but reasoning, the principles of polemical argument are, of course, not different from any other. But there are some peculiar questions touching it which need to be answered.

1. The first is the question of arrangement. In what part of a discourse affirming truth shall objections be considered? On the one hand, it is urged that if you advance your own propositions and proofs before the objections are cleared away, you may find that these have totally obstructed the minds of your hearers. The fortress must be breached before the storming-party is sent in. On the other hand, Whateley well replies, that if you begin with the consideration of the whole group of objections, you prejudice your own cause in advance by showing the people how much can be said against it. He therefore recommends that the discussion be opened with some obvious and effective affirmative arguments, that the objections be considered in the mid-

dle, and the progress then resumed and closed with other direct and climatic proofs. A better rule is the following: Introduce objections along with those affirmative heads of your own argument where their solution is most natural and ready. You will nearly always find that there is special relation between a particular objection and some particular support of the true proposition. The latter presents the immediate point of view for exposing the former. The advantages of my rule are, that a formidable array of objections in any one place of your discourse is thus avoided by their distribution throughout it; that time is economized by taking up each objection just where your affirmative argument has prepared the way for a speedy and facile dealing with it; and, above all, that this method leaves upon the hearer's mind a strong impression of the satisfying harmony and beautiful consistency of truth.

2. Time should never be wasted by citing trivial or unknown objections. Give your hearers credit for good sense enough to apply your demonstration to the shallow ones, without words on your part. Indeed, a masterly affirmative argument is always the best refutation. To inform your hearers of an objection about which they were in happy ignorance, that you may have the glory of refuting it, is pedantry. It is as though a physician should give his patient a poison in order to exhibit his skill with antidotes. It may be that in consequence of some peculiarity or infirmity of constitution your antidote will fail to act, and then you will have killed your man for naught. But when you feel that an objection is so known and influential that it must be formally noticed, make thorough work with it. Let

your refutation he unanswerable. Nothing makes a more damaging impression of feebleness than to grapple with the objector without clearly overthrowing him. Your hearer is thus taught by yourself to suspect the justice of your arguments.

3. Opposers should always be treated with fairness and courtesy, except where their own insolence or wickedness demands chastisement.

One application of this maxim is to teach us abstinence from the use of controversial phrases, party names and all the old war-cries of polemic discussion. The preacher should rarely assault, by name, a rival denomination of Christians. If, for instance, a Presbyterian pastor begins: "*Methodists* teach that a true believer may totally and finally fall away from a state of grace: this I shall now refute," every person of that persuasion in the house will naturally feel as though he were personally assailed. But had this pastor advanced the opposite doctrine, so explained as to free it from odious misconceptions, in a didactic mode and temper, making only a respectful general reference to an honest difference of judgment upon it among the recognized followers of Christ, every fair-minded adherent of Wesley would have listened without offence, and would have come away with the pleasing impression that Christians were not so far asunder upon this vexed question as he had supposed. It is very much due to the observance of this simple rule that wise pastors (without infidelity to truth) preserve pleasant relations with other communions, hold their own ground triumphantly against encroachments, and even win accessions, without awakening denominational strife. And it is usually the rash

contempt of this easy caution which plunges others into unseemly and mischievous rivalries.

Another lesson of my third maxim is, that objections, if stated at all, be stated fairly. Give them any weight which they may deserve. It is well that you should set your opponents' arguments in even stronger lights than they were able to throw upon them; for manifest candour is the best plea on your own side. The people will see that you have no fear of the objection, and this alone will almost reassure them as to your ability to annihilate it; but if they detect you dodging its real point, they will regard this as a confession of virtual defeat. By placing both the objection and its refutation in a clearer light than your antagonist, you make your hearers feel that you have that superior mastery of the whole subject, which entitles you to correct him and to instruct them. There are also objections which have real difficulty to the human mind, and yet the propositions against which they lie are true. The only solution of such cases is in acknowledging the limitation of our faculties. Let the admission be then freely made, and let the mystery, after being defined and explained as far as established truths enable us to do it, be left to the candour of the hearer.

Once more: see to it that, whatever may be the superiority or weakness of your logical ability, you surpass your antagonist in Christian charity and self-control. The people are very apt to associate a good man with a good cause. Your reasonings may not be appreciated; but the argument of a forbearing temper will be understood by the most ignorant.

4. My last precept may be expressed in the words

of that injunction which *Talleyrand* is said to have urged upon his diplomatic agents: "*Pas trop zélé.*" By this I do not recommend that you shall defend the truth of God against his assailants with a cold indifference: he deserves an ardent, loving zeal; but I mean that you shall be satisfied with a substantial victory for him. It is enough to convince the objector that he was mistaken: it is not well to attempt to convict him also of absurdity, of virtual idiocy and of malignity, except in those cases where such depravity has been so obtruded as to outrage the properties of truth and righteousness. If your auditors know your opponent as a well-meaning man, as a decent Christian, as a sensible person in other things, as entitled in the judgment of charity to the claim of sincerity, then they may be willing to go along with you in the conclusion that he has been obviously in error, provided the superior mastery of the subject which you display warrants such a claim. But when you demand of them that they shall also vote him a fool, a rascal, a deceitful traitor to truth, they will demur; for they will say, "Do not we know this person as, in the main, a good man?" By such an extreme use of your victory you will forfeit it, and restore to error a sympathy to which it is not entitled.