

## LECTURE XV.

### *DIVISION OF THE ARGUMENT.*

HAVING examined the nature of argument and given some specific rules for constructing it, we are now prepared to adopt a principle of *division*. The five constituent members of the regular discourse—exordium, explication, proposition, argument and conclusion—are, in one sense, divisions of the sermon. But among these the argument is the main body of the discourse, and it is the division of this of which I now speak.

You have seen that method, which is an orderly arrangement of parts, implies discrimination. We must divide in order to dispose. The architect must assort and separate his materials before he can rear his building. The naturalist dissects his animals and plants, that he may classify. A few high authorities, *Fénélon* and Bishop Burnett, renounce division as a sin against unity.<sup>1</sup> The former objects that "divisions

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<sup>1</sup> *Fénélon*, Dialogue ii., Concerning Eloquence. Burnett's "Pastoral Care," p. 249. But *Fénélon* really explains away his sweeping renunciation of divisions, argues the importance of distinct method, and gives a beautiful outline of what it should be. His objection, therefore, is no more than a repudiating of the scholastic formality, and of the habit of pre-announcing the heads.

I find Dr. J. W. Alexander, "Thoughts on Preaching," pp. 42, 52,

really clog and mangle a discourse," that "there remains no true unity after such divisions, seeing they make two or three different discourses, which are joined into one only by an arbitrary connection." This objection may be valid against divisions which are merely formal, but not against those which are natural. There cannot be a discourse without parts. Unity itself implies parts, and it does not consist in the amalgamation, but the orderly juncture of the various materials into one component whole. If the idea of this objection were pushed to its full extent, it would require not only one head, but one single thought, so that the discourse must either be shortened to a paragraph, or else expanded by mere repetition into a wearisome platitude. In the landscape, unity of impression is not gained by flattening the whole scene into a uniform, horizontal plane, but by the happy combination of the swelling hills, the smiling and undulating champaign, the field, the wood, the mansion and the water. The historical painting produces one effect, but it is by the grouping of several distinct and perhaps contrasted figures. A uniformity of colour would be no picture whatever, but

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under the name of "free writing," recommending composition without a plan and objecting to it as cramping and impoverishing discourse. This language might well prove very mischievous to the learner. The reason that Dr. Alexander could succeed without previous method was that through mental culture and long experience, both in composition and *extempore* speaking, he had so thoroughly trained his powers that he was able to excogitate a true method easily and without conscious pause. Use had made the labour of arrangement so perfectly facile that it went on along with that of expression. Of course he no longer needed the previous skeleton. Let not the tyro conclude thence that he can do the same.

a dingy, neutral expanse of canvas. The preacher must, then, at least divide his matter in his own mind in order to have method.

All divisions of the main argument may be classed as Scholastic, Textual or Topical. The first is a legacy to us from the dialectics of the Middle Ages, and it is justly obnoxious to the accusations of the more rational and natural moderns like *Fénélon*. With an appearance of great naturalness and scripturalness, it is often really unnatural and unscriptural. To the dominion of this method many of the blemishes of the Puritan preaching were due. It consists in first deducing from the text, by a suitable exposition, a strict proposition, and, second, in treating first the subject of this, then the predicate, and then the copula or affirmation. Every sermon must therefore have three heads—neither more nor less; for, urged the scholastics, do not these three things compose every proposition?

Such a procrustean bed must, of course, cramp or mangle nearly every subject which was stretched upon it. To explain it, let us take an instance as favourable to the method as can perhaps be found among important texts. Eph. ii. 8: "For by grace are ye saved." The proposition deduced must be this: "Salvation is gratuitous." The first head must discuss the question, What is salvation? the second, the notion of gratuity as predicated of God's salvation, and the third, the affirmation. Now, if one desired really to preach the proposition of the text (which is the text) the first and second heads should have been dispatched in the explication, and the assertion of the copula should have occupied all the argument, its heads consisting of the sev-

eral evidences which demonstrate the free grace of redemption. Another example may be found in 1 Tim. i. 15. The proposition derived will be: "The gospel saying deserves universal acceptance." On the scholastic plan of division, the first head should treat of the gospel saying, viz.: "That Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." Here must be introduced the doctrine of Christ's incarnation and person, the legal and moral position of man as a sinner, and the nature of salvation. Will this be a division of the sermon, or a volume of theology? The second head will explain the predicate, which is also complex, including the species of faith which Christ claims, and the nature and universality of that claim on the conscience. Thus, before the preacher can possibly arrive at the third head, the actual assertion of this claim, which properly is his only task in the main discussion, he is made to range over the commonplaces of nearly the whole of revealed theology! Once more: 1 John iv. 8 presents us in its form an exact proposition: "God is love." The first head under the scholastic method would answer the question, What is the subject, God? Can there be a juster answer than that of the Catechism? "God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." The second head treats of love as simple benevolence, or the love of kindness, distinguished from the love of moral complacency, and defined by the different postures and conditions of its objects, as grace, pity or mercy. What a vast range of topics, scriptural indeed and of sacred importance, yet irrelevant to that truth which should have been the delightful burden

of the whole discussion, God's benevolence, to lead us away from it!

The Scholastic Division is, we thus see, faulty in its nature. Its usual error is to thrust into the third head what should be the real sermon, the main argument, and to degrade the chief heads of that body into subdivisions of a division. If this old method (of which you will now seldom hear an example) is to be employed at all, it is only when the whole sermon is designed to be explanatory, and the affirmation of its proposition is intentionally compressed into a subordinate space.

The Textual Division is simple, scriptural and beautiful in that class of texts and passages to which it fairly applies. It simply makes the distribution of the matter of discussion as the phrases or commas of the text stand in the Scriptures, changing nothing except perhaps the order of the clauses among themselves. I explain it in the following instance: 1 Cor. i. 30, "Who (Christ) of God is made unto us *wisdom*, and *righteousness*, and *sanctification*, and *redemption*." The proposition is, "Christ is made of God our salvation." The heads are, because he is the source (1) of our sufficient illumination, (2) of our justification, (3) of our purification, and (4) (conclusion by summary) thus, of our complete redemption. Other instances, for which the textual division is suitable, may be seen in John xiv. 6: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." In Rom. viii. 30; in 2 Cor. vii. 11 and in 2 Pet. i. 5-7. Wherever it is applicable it should be preferred as doing honour to the Word, and as fixing it most prominently in the hearer's mind.

But there are many texts where it cannot be fairly applied, because the several clauses or phrases into which the sacred writer has distributed his words were not intended by him to be logical distributions of matter, but rhetorical amplifications or emphatic repetitions, and such like. Let us suppose that we were required to discuss Rom. ii. 8, 9: God "will render . . . indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, to every soul of man that doeth evil." If we should adopt a textual division here according to the four words, and represent "indignation" as one species of the recompense of sin, "wrath" as a second and distinct one, "tribulation" as a third, and "anguish" as a fourth, we should outrageously pervert the apostle's meaning. The passage is intensely animated: he uses, in the glow of his rhetoric, an amplification of each of the pair of ideas (God's righteous anger, and the misery it visits on the guilty) which he would evolve. Many other verses are incapable of a textual division, because the words, whether few or many, really present but a single, undivided point. Such are these (John iii. 7), where the sole predication is the necessity of regeneration, and the words, by themselves, suggest nothing whatever, as to the heads of the evidence, which demonstrate that necessity. Such is Heb. iv. 13: "Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight; but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to do." The only proposition for the preacher here is the assertion of God's omniscience of our spirits. In the explication you might briefly and appropriately touch the questions, What is meant by "manifest in his sight"? How are creatures' spirits "naked and

opened to him"? What are God's eyes? What is it which we "have to do" with him? But if these should be made the heads of the main discussion, there would be a mischievous breach of unity and a real violation of the apostle's scope. That intent is to impress us with God's perfect knowledge of all the acts and affections of our spirits. This result must be gained either by exemplifying or proving the truths asserted, under heads to be suggested, not by the phrases, but by the grounds of this truth itself.

This, then, is the idea of the topical division. Assuming that the author of the text did not design to indicate the true divisions of his thought by his distribution of words, the preacher seeks them for himself in the logic of his subject. He does not indeed seek them in unscriptural sources, nor even in unscriptural forms of expression; for the logic to which he goes for his divisions will be Bible-logic only. Having gathered these members of argument from the whole Scriptures, he will divide it according to its real discriminations of thought.

Topical divisions will usually fall under two general classes. First, where the form of discussion is strictly demonstrative, the design being to prove a proposition asserted, each distinct branch of the argument will form a head of the discourse. The division in this case is obvious, as soon as the several evidences are collected and arranged. Second, in explanatory sermons the subject will be decomposed by descending from *genus* to *species*. The truth unfolded will be set forth either in the parts which compose it, or in a series of different relations or aspects. For example,

let the text be, "Honour thy father and thy mother," and let us suppose that the task undertaken in the sermon is the didactic explanation of filial duty. This is composed of—1. Respect; 2. Maintenance; 3. Obedience; 4. Affection. Or, as an example of the second subdivision, let the text be Rom. xii. 11: Be "not slothful in business," and the task of the preacher is the commendation of diligence. Its advantages may be set forth—1. To one's self; 2. To one's family; 3. To society; 4. To the Church. Or else the practical sermon may seek to enforce a duty: its several grounds or motives will in this case furnish the several heads, as in the class of demonstrative sermons.

I would now announce a few rules of the most practical nature, which, as I conceive, should always guide you in the forming of divisions, whether they be textual or topical.

1. Divisions should not be numerous. Although the sermon is a composition very different from the drama, the limit affixed to the number of acts by Horace<sup>1</sup> is a safe one, at least on the major side. He prohibits more than five. Multiplied divisions are every way objectionable. They overburden the memory, whereas a real object of method is to aid memory. While they wear an appearance of great exactness, they are really inaccurate, because the necessities of an artificial symmetry often constrain those who employ them to make a distinction which is not according to a true difference.

<sup>1</sup> Ep. ad Pisones, line 189:

"Neve minor, neu sit quinto productior actu  
Fabula."

They confuse and embarrass the hearer's mind. They destroy movement. They cast an air of insufferable dryness over a discourse. It is as though the tree, beautiful in the proportions of its stem, its branches, its twigs and its foliage, the natural constituent parts, were reduced to an unsightly heap of chips.

2. Whenever the topic of a head or division is announced or defined, the same precept should govern which was given for the statement of the proposition, and for the same reasons. The language must be carefully chosen for brevity, perspicuity and accuracy of meaning. The words must be discriminative, and they must not be numerous. To overload the mind of your hearer, in these critical sentences of your discussion, with obscure and involved expressions, is an unpardonable fault. As I enjoined it on you to study the choice of words for announcing your subject until your phrase is as terse, brief and true as possible, so I repeat this injunction as to the statement of these divisions. If you judge it admissible in any case to set out all your heads together at the beginning of the discussion, the terms ought to have that happy appropriateness and expressive brevity which will make it positively difficult for the hearer to forget them, and which will render them, after your subject is expanded, a correct miniature of the sermon. I recall just here a happy instance of such announcement in the sermon of an English divine on Matt. xxvii. 4. He announces as his subject the "Sorrow of Judas," and promises to treat, 1. Of its Origin; 2. Its Object; 3. Its Extent; and 4. Its Result. Its origin is then shown to be self-love. Its object is only the shame and penalty of his crime. Its

extent is only a flagrant secular transgression. And its result is damnation. Here are four simple but masterly strokes of the pencil, giving a suggestive outline of the whole picture. They are also discriminative and scriptural, as well as natural and easy, for they delineate the essential difference between spurious and genuine repentance.

3. The heads must, each one, present a branch of the discussion distinct from the others, and co-ordinate with them in relation to the main subject. Never make a "division without a difference." The inevitable result is confusion and error; for the lines of thought in the two divisions being virtually the same, the preacher will be guilty of anticipation and repetition. It is not enough that the heads be truly distinct; they must also be co-ordinate. If the real relation of a thought is subordinate to that which you propose to make your second head, it is a vicious arrangement to exalt it into a first, or a third head, and to give it a separate treatment. It should be reduced to a subdivision of the head under which it belongs, that it may be promptly and correctly treated under its own class. A moment's reflection will show you that the attempt to expand it independently must introduce repetition or obscurity.

4. The division should be thorough. My meaning is, that it should comprehend the full strength of the proposition which you undertake. In topical sermons that proposition may not be exhaustive of the whole meaning of the text; for I have expressly allowed the preacher, after fairly indicating in his explication the whole meaning of the text, to tell his hearers that there is too much in it for one discussion, and to undertake

the argument of only a part. In textual divisions the rule of thoroughness also applies in this sense, that no member of the text must be omitted in the division. The preacher must urge all that the sacred writer has urged in that place which is chosen for a text. This precept is grounded on the obvious reason that you are bound to do justice to God's truth: you are not permitted, after undertaking its presentation, to make a partial betrayal of its strength by the omission of a constituent ground of its force. It is not the part of a faithful herald to emasculate his king's message of any part of its authority. For example, the preacher who undertakes to present the scriptural evidences that Christ's sufferings were punishment, and made a vicarious satisfaction for guilt, has no right to intimate that he has done, before he has given the important argument for this truth, drawn from the nature of the Levitical sacrifices and the Redeemer's relation to them as an antitype. This would be to maim God's truth.

Such a rule implies, obviously, that the preacher is not to be guided by mere originality in selecting his materials. He must "bring forth from his treasury things new and old;" he must be willing to act, not as an inventor, but an expounder; he is humbly and faithfully to teach the people all those known but fundamental truths which other generations of ministers have taught to their contemporaries. Two objections may present themselves to your minds. The one is, that my rule may compel you to prolong your sermon inordinately, if you must not stop until you have exhibited the whole force of the Scripture argument. I reply, license must always be left to every reasoner, as to the

extent to which he shall expand his arguments. If time forbids more, remainiug heads may at least be named, with an advertisement to your hearers of the force you claim for them; or the people may be expressly told that you have not done, and that another sermon must follow to complete the truth. The other objection is, that I seem to require every minister, however humble his natural gifts, to equal the force of the greatest masters. I answer, that I do require of every minister, however humble his natural endowments, competency for his sacred work. I do not expect him, indeed, to rival the animation, felicity, imagination or splendour of the great genius; but I demand of him that he shall be substantially master of his subject, that he shall use the diligence required for declaring the whole counsel of God concerning it, in his own plain and homely way. This he can do, if he is faithful, without genius.

5. The parts must be ranked, *inter se*, in an order which is convenient and germinant. The requirements of movement and climax have already been enforced in my remarks on the structure of argument. The heads must also follow each other in such order that this consideration, which prepares the way for the facile comprehension of that other, shall precede. We thus gain the greatest economy of words, time and effort. It is also most desirable that the divisions be ranked in a germinant order, so that the first shall lead to the second, and the second to the third, by an easy and graceful transition. This is necessary to maintain the continuity of discourse, and to avoid the feeling of a shock or jolt in the movement. Nothing adds more to the grace of

discourse than pleasing transitions. When the matter of the divisions does not furnish these obviously, they should be carefully sought out. An apt illustration, an episode, an incident, a contrast, briefly introduced, may furnish the stepping-stone which is needed, for a happy passage from one part of the discussion to another.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The young preacher may, at first, find the application of these principles touching method and division intricate and arduous. Let me advise you, then, to concede all that can be allowed to the infirmity of our understandings, and by doing one thing at a time, to lighten this labour as much as may be. Explore the field and collect the materials first, without troubling yourselves at that stage with questions of arrangement. After satisfying yourselves that you have substantially the whole ground before you, inspect each part, so as to become well acquainted with it. Then proceed to the important question of arrangement after these labours of discovery are completed. Do not hesitate to use, in your private preparation, every convenience, such as written *memoranda* of heads, which may assist the labours of recollection and comparison. Then, at length, after your method is digested, begin the actual composition (if the sermon is to be written). Let me exemplify my advice. We will suppose, for instance, that the task I have set myself is to prepare for preaching on the next Sabbath on Rom. iii. 20: "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight," and that I propose to treat it doctrinally, under a topical division, as a "capital text," or important point in divinity. Such a sermon presents us the plainest instance of the questions of arrangement. The proposition is quickly and certainly deduced: "Justification is not because of the merit of the believer's works."

I proceed to study authorities, as time allows: first the Holy Scriptures, and then the soundest treatises, such as those of Turretin and Owen. As I read I keep pencil and paper by me, and jot down everything which strikes me as possibly a point for the argument. I read on until I find from the recurrence of ideas already gathered, that I have apparently explored the whole field of discussion, at least in all

There remains one more question touching division on which modern authorities are divided. It is whether all the heads of a sermon must be pre-announced to—

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its important outlines. The result, we will suppose, is the following immethodical list :

The merit of the believer's works does not justify :

Because by the law is the knowledge of sin.

Because all works are imperfect, while the law is absolute in its claims.

Because St. Paul excludes moral and ceremonial works.

Because the Bible says justification is gratuitous.

Because remission (a cardinal part of justification) implies no payment.

Because the Bible says, "justification not of law."

Because this would derogate from Christ's honour and inflate pride.

Because future obedience does not pay past debts.

Because true good works are only effects of, and so consequent on, justification.

Because justification is "by faith," but faith is receptive in its acting.

Because of Scripture testimonies, such as Rom. iv. 5; xi. 6; Gal. ii. 16; Tit. iii. 5, etc., declaring the same doctrine.

You will observe that my list has no marks or numbers as yet to indicate any order. It apparently contains eleven separate points—a number entirely too large for a sermon. Let us carefully inspect them. One thing which we soon perceive is, that the third, sixth and eleventh points are substantially similar, being all scriptural testimonies directly to the proposition. Let us reduce them to one head by grouping them together. The fourth and tenth are also so cognate, that they can without error be fused into one argument; for the purely receptive nature of faith in its actings about justification shows that this is gratuitous—faith being confessedly its instrument. The seventh point also is manifestly so near akin to these, that its force can be saved by making it a sequel or consequence under them. Boasting is excluded, and Christ claims all the glory, only because the work is gratuitous and man's agency in it simply receptive. The first, fifth and eighth points are also cognate. The function of the law, now that we have broken it, is to ascertain our debt of guilt; subsequent

gether, before the discussion of any is begun. The scholastic and many of the Puritan preachers require this; and Doddridge even urges their repetition a second

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obedience, however meritorious, cannot pay this off, and remission, the petition of every believing sinner, is release of the debt without payment from him. After these unions, there remain five independent points, which, written again in their chance order, are the following:

All works are imperfect; but the claims of the law are absolute.

St. Paul and other Scripture authorities expressly exclude the law and the merit of works.

Justification is declared gratuitous, faith's only agency in it is receptive, no boasting is left to man, and Christ claims all.

Remission (a leading part of justification) requires no payment; and this, future obedience, when once the law ascertains our debt, cannot do.

True good works are effects, and so cannot be causes, of justification.

In this list no heterogeneous arguments are grouped together. The number of heads is no longer too large, yet all the points are intelligibly introduced in such connections that they support each other better than when separated. It now only remains that we inspect our five heads again, to determine an order of sequence for them, *inter se*, which shall be germinant, logical and progressive. I promptly perceive that the head which stands second above, consisting of a group of express proof-texts, should come last, as making an end of debate by the authority of God. I therefore assign it in my mind to the fifth place, thus disembarassing further questions of order by one element, at least. I also perceive that the point of argument which stands fourth in the list is nearest akin to the first; for, in unfolding the senses in which God's law is absolute, I must show that it demands perpetual as well as perfect obedience; in failure of which, it puts in an inexorable penal claim. Here, then, is the logical and natural transition from the one head to the other, in the idea of debt, which works cannot pay. I determine, therefore, that the fourth must immediately follow the first. I also see that these must be (in the order last named) the first two heads of the sermon, because neither of the remaining two is introductory to the others. The head last in the list is most proper to close the reasoning, both because the fact which is its premise (that good works are fruits of

time. They claim that this assists the memory of the hearer to retain the sermon; that it is necessary to his comprehension of its method and plan; that it defines to him more clearly the precise point of the main proposition, which otherwise he is apt to misconceive; that it enables him to relieve his restlessness, by marking off the stages of the discourse, and thus calculating how much is still coming; and that if momentary inattention supervenes, the hearer can still, by his recollection of the heads, regain the thread of discourse.

But it is objected by many others that the precepts and examples of the classic orators are against this usage, for they did not proclaim their intended divisions in advance; and Cicero advises that they be studiously

justification) is evinced by the previous, and because it has a sharp, demonstrative force which fits it for the climax. I resolve, therefore, that it shall be my fourth head. It only remains to assign the head not yet numbered to the third place, where it coheres well with what precedes. The work of arrangement is now complete as to the main heads of the discussion, and gives us this result:

The merit of our works does not justify; because,

1. All works are *imperfect*; but the claims of the divine law are *absolute*.
2. *Remission* excludes *payment*, and *this* a *condemned* man's obedience cannot make.
3. Hence justification gratuitous, faith's agency in it receptive, and boasting excluded.
4. True good works are effects, and so cannot be causes, of justification.
5. Paul and others confirm—Cite and apply. Evasions and objections noted at their appropriate places.

Does this process appear to you long and careful? I do not conceal the fact that it is, and should be so. But then, it gains for us an inestimable advantage—that of thorough method. This necessary quality cannot be bought cheaper.

and intentionally concealed until the proper time for the disclosure of each.<sup>1</sup> The example of other departments of popular eloquence is against Doddridge's rule: their masters do not pre-announce any heads of discourse. This practice casts over the whole discourse an artificial and premeditated air, which must be detrimental to its movement and emotion. It seems to advertise the hearer in advance that all the preacher's seeming artlessness and impulses are artificial. It takes off the edge of curiosity, producing some of the same evil effect, which the study of a meagre abridgment works upon the student of science. It confines and cramps the genius of the speaker, which, when animated by effort and sympathy, might otherwise strike *impromptu* upon thoughts nobler than any which were premeditated.

Such are the arguments of the two parties. The latter seem to me to have the right, especially since it is easy to obviate the force of all that is urged by the first. It is true that people often show a singular and perverse ingenuity in missing the true point of the most plainly announced proposition; but I showed you, that the proper place to guard against this is the explication which leads to the proposition. If this is what it should be, it will leave no possibility of mistake for any one who attends. The speaker, again, should so speak as not to produce restlessness in his hearer: if this arises, no mode could be easily conceived more effectual for disappointing the real ends of discourse, than to set the hearer to counting the coming beads, to see how much

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<sup>1</sup> De Orat., Bk. ii.

longer he was to be wearied. I required that the proposition should be so announced as to obtrude it effectually upon the attention of all. It is this which will give the sufficient clue to any part of the discussion, if the method is really perspicuous. This method should so develop itself to the hearer, as the discourse proceeds, that its members shall be obvious; and it is this very disclosure of the structure which should stimulate and charm the attention. Rhetorical discourse should be a beautiful, living growth, which results in setting its full-formed product before the delighted spectator, obvious in the harmony and completeness of the parts. It is not an anatomical synthesis which gives us a ghastly skeleton upon which to build some dead model. And finally, if recollection of the sermon is desirable for the hearer, let him be aided in this by an animated recapitulation at the close, instead of a dry pre-announcement at the beginning. The former, as we have seen, will possess the immeasurable advantage of recalling the parts of the discourse, not as dry bones, but as full-formed, warm and glowing members. For these reasons I should dissuade from the formal recital of heads at the beginning of the argument, except in a few cases, where didactic accuracy is the object, rather than rhetorical impression.

•But you will not consider me here as retracting anything that I have urged in favour of right method. The preacher is imperatively bound to have this, primarily for himself, and ultimately for his hearers. His own perception of his arrangement should be perfect when he begins to speak; his hearer's view of it should be correct when he is done. The development

of his subject must be a development of his method also, and the latter must be so lucid that it will be impossible for the intelligent listener to misconceive it. He is thus enabled to carry away all the substance of the discourse in a compact arrangement.