

## LECTURE XX.

### *STYLE.—CONTINUED.*

**B**UT the style of the pulpit must surpass that of secular orators in seriousness or gravity. The moral, spiritual and divine truths which exclusively occupy the preacher, the sacredness of his professed motive, and the momentous stake which his hearers have in the transaction,—all show that levity of thought or manner would here be an odious fault. Jocular images, satire and sarcasm are not the sword of the spirit. They may amuse or irritate, but they do not make the heart better. Would any one plead that the former may be legitimate to arouse the attention, and the latter to chastise crime? The answer is, that an expedient for gaining the ear, so heterogeneous to the tone of sacred truth as a ludicrous jest, will make an impression more adverse to the flow of sacred emotion than inattention itself. Satire and sarcasm are inconsistent with that pitying love, which should animate the appeals of a sinner saved by grace to his doomed fellow-creatures. Sarcasm is usually the language of malice. It is claimed as an exception, that we hear Isaiah satirizing the folly of idol-worshippers, Elijah mocking the priests of Baal, and our Saviour scourging hypocrisy with the lash of sarcasm.<sup>1</sup> This is true; but they were inspired and

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<sup>1</sup> Isa. xliv. 14-17; 1 Kings xviii. 27; Matt. xxiii. 24.

extraordinary preachers: our more humble position should teach us to resort very sparingly to such weapons. You may also remind me that I have myself pointed to the wit of apt illustrations as an admirable element of their force. But this is serious wit, not jocular; stimulating, but not excoriating. I am also ready to concede that there is often a trait in the images of an original and masculine imagination, which approaches near the confines of humour; but this trait, although it may provoke the involuntary smile, is not levity: it often lies hard by the fountain of tears and the abysses of deepest moral emotion. In these instances it is the fact that the element of serious wit or humour is involuntary, yea, unconscious, which is its defence: the moment it appears to have been intruded into the sermon with intention it becomes an odious sin.<sup>1</sup>

The second peculiarity of pulpit style should be scripturalness. This includes two points: the sermon should be rich in apt scriptural quotations, and its whole language should be imbued with the tone and characteristics of our time-honoured version. Such a style is to be

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<sup>1</sup> "He that negotiates between God and man,  
As God's ambassador, the grand concern  
Of judgment and of mercy, should beware  
Of lightness in his speech. 'Tis pitiful  
To court a grin when you should woo a soul;  
To break a jest when pity would inspire  
Pathetic exhortation; and to address  
The skittish fancy with facetious tales,  
When sent with God's commission to the heart.  
So did not Paul. Direct me to a quip  
Or merry turn in all he ever wrote,  
And I consent you take it for your text,  
Your only one, till sides and benches fail."—*Task*.

preferred by the preacher for every reason. The literary merits of the English Bible as a "well of old English undefiled" make it the best possible model for the student of sacred knowledge. In this venerable book we have embalmed that standard speech of the race which is at once pure, classic and popular. The associations and mental habitudes of the people which have gathered around this version commend it to us as a standard. It is more universally read by Protestants than any other religious book; so that it is to be presumed its language is most familiar and intelligible to them. The most tender and solemn associations of every pious mind are linked with its words; their very rhythm is sacred music to the ear. The preacher who imbues his style with their savour will be sure of having the charm of appropriateness.

But this scriptural style does not consist in a servile aping of a few Bible phrases current among religious people; for this would but render you trite and fulsome. Nor does it consist in an ingenious patchwork of the more quaint images culled from the symbolical parts of the prophets and poets; for this is but pious pedantry and sober trifling. You must read and study the Bible with perpetual diligence, until your whole thought and feeling are imbued with its tone. It will be a profitable exercise to commit to memory extended passages of the highest rhetorical beauty, that the recitation of them to yourself may serve to inspire and invigorate your souls, and fix, as it were, a higher key-note for their strains. There is a difficulty, which no attentive writer can have failed to appreciate, in using the finest Scripture quotations: the contrast was too strong between their majesty

and the poverty of his own succeeding words. It will be a useful exercise to you to admit such a citation into the body of your writing, and then return and labour to elevate your own composition, without mimicry, nearer the level of the borrowed strain. You will thus discover what are the traits which you lack to make your style worthy of the Scripture model beside it.

The third requisite of pulpit style is simplicity. I use this word in its moral as well as its literary sense. In manner, simplicity is the opposite, not of art, but of artifice; and in motive it is the opposite of conceit, vanity, ambition and every affection inconsistent with the spiritual sincerity and zeal on which I insisted under a previous head. It excludes, of course, bombast, grandiloquence, prurient ornament, affectation and intricacy of style. It requires simplicity of structure; because a composition which is to be spoken by the voice and caught by the ear as uttered, or else not understood at all, must be more direct, lucid and brief than the essay which can be read and read again. In long and involved sentences, the speaker's voice cannot easily manage and sustain the inflections which are requisite to give expression to the sentiment. In listening to such sentences, the hearer's attention is overtaxed to carry so complicated a structure and meaning. This simplicity employs an unambitious vocabulary. I will not enjoin the preacher, as some have done, to expunge every word which the humblest hearer finds unintelligible; for one of the uses of the teacher is to extend his pupils' vocabulary. But there should be no affectation of hard words. The minister's style should be usually level to the meaner capacities, because the culti-

vated can understand and be saved by a simple style, but the ignorant cannot profit by an inflated style. The latter can benefit only one class, the former both. Indeed, every person of true learning and taste approves a simple style for such a topic, as not only most useful to the ignorant, but most pleasing to himself. Simplicity implies, finally, a profound singleness, directness and purity of motive in the sacred orator.

Unless I am much mistaken, this holy simplicity needs to be strongly enforced, because the opposite vice is far gone. A reference to classic standards will show that much we now hear from the pulpit would be condemned as bombast by an Addison, a Swift or a Pope. Even Dr. Samuel Johnson, the proverb of his day for inflation, seems natural and terse by the side of many who are now admired. Let us compare ourselves with the great ancient masters of style as to the number of words, the intricacy of structure, the useless epithets and the prurient ornament; let us look, for example, into that most elegant of Latin composers (Horace), as distinguished for the perfectness of his diction as for the hatefulness of his morals, and we shall see that we are as far behind him in true elegance as in simplicity.

The careless haste with which men now write and read the floods of rubbish which pour from the press fosters the same vice. He who has much thought uses compact and pregnant words. As the art of writing much with small materials is extended, complexity and verbosity must prevail. Expansion of shallow ideas goes farther and farther; real triteness of thought is concealed under increasing extravagance, which seeks a cheap applause by striving to outdo itself and its rivals.

A mercenary, luxurious, material civilization surely depreciates the taste of a people. Simplicity of character is lost. That manliness of soul, which proceeds from labour, struggles with difficulty, and intercourse with nature, is gone. The frivolous and sensual race demands the same rank luxury and frippery in its literature which it loves in its animal enjoyments. We know how, in the corruptions of imperial Rome, the masculine eloquence of the republic sank into the puerile and tawdry bombast of the Byzantine style. If the profligate luxury and degrading bondage introduced by the "decline and fall" of the great modern republic do not result in the same effects, the laws of nature must be reversed.

Hence, the conviction has grown upon me, that we need to be recalled to what will seem to this exaggerating age a severe simplicity. I would that each true minister of the gospel might stand forth as a Tacitus amidst the pruriency of this degenerate race. But when I seek this result I am far from waging war against rhetoric, ornament, skill, or polish. I would not have you confound a simple with a low and common style. The truest art is that which has become perfect nature. It does not supplant or exclude, but only perfects nature. The finest statue is that on which the strokes of the chisel are unseen, and the marble appears most like the flesh which grew. The finest picture is that in which the beholder is not reminded of the brush and the cunning mixture of colours, but seems to see the living man standing out from the canvas. So, if preaching be considered as an art merely, he is most perfect in the art in whom the hearer perceives no art,

but hears Nature pouring forth her soul in her own spontaneous simplicity. An objection, then, against artifice is that it is a sin against true art. Much that is now heard with admiration from the pulpit is as thoroughly condemned by mere rhetoric, by the pagan Horace's Epistle to the Pisos, or the comedian's instructions to the players in Hamlet, as by Christian principle and feeling.<sup>1</sup>

But let us proceed to direct considerations. The soul is such that all its powerful operations are simple. Complexity in its acts implies the feebleness of all. Multiplicity of objects distracts the attention, and by distracting, weakens. It is the single, rushing, mighty wind which raises the billows of the great deep; a variety of cross breezes only ruffles its surface with insignificant ripples. A moment's reflection upon the powers of the mind explains this. They are quick, but they are not infinite; there is a narrow limit to the number of separate images which men can comprehend in the same moment. If the attention is perfect, every word addressed to the ear makes a demand for sensation, perception, memory and some higher acts, either of comparison or imagination, or both. How many things to be done by the mind for the due comprehension of each sentence! Hence, every superfluous word taxes the mind with an unnecessary labour, and calls it away from the thought. The verbose speaker, therefore, builds obstacles to the comprehension of his ideas, and, as it were, offers his hearers a *premium* for inattention. It is for this reason that brevity is necessary to

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<sup>1</sup> Quinctil., L. i., c. ii., § 3. Nam si qua in his ars est dicentium, ea prima est, ne ars esse videatur.

energy. To use any phrase, ornament or epithet which is not necessary to the bodying forth of the main idea, is a sacrifice of effect. Every labour of attention, perception and comprehension, expended upon that excrescence, is so much subtracted from the force with which the mind should have grasped the main idea. Prune your language, then, with a severe hand. When we wish to strike a blow which shall be felt, we do not take up a bough loaded with foliage; we use a naked club.

I suspect that the correctness of these views is confessed, even by the consciousness of persons of the most perverted taste. However they may laud their literary idol, they cannot conceal from themselves, that their listlessness grows more and more dreary under the most brilliant flashes of his rhetorical pyrotechnics—that the more his sparks are multiplied the more feebly they strike. There is, indeed, a large class of listeners whose minds are so utterly shallow, and who are so unconscious of the real nature of eloquence, that they are pleased with the mere lingual and grammatical dexterity with which surprising strings of fine words are rolled forth. Their idea of fine speaking seems to be, that it is a sort of vocal *legerdemain*, like that of the juggler who twirls a plate upon the end of a rattan as no one else can—an art in which the skill is measured solely by the difficulty, and the perfection consists in connecting the largest quantity of sounding words so that they shall have a certain semblance of meaning and melody. With minds so childish he who can carry this loquacity to the greatest height will, of course, be most admired. But I trust that none of you are capable of an ambition for this low and ignorant applause.

I would also argue more definitely, the preacher's topic and motive demand this simplicity of manner and style. He speaks :

“Of man's first disobedience and fruit,  
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste  
Brought death unto the world and all our woe;  
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man  
Restore us and regain the blissful seat.”

He professes to stand between the living and the dead. He deals with the attributes of a jealous and majestic God, the destiny of souls to immortal bliss or woe, the tomb, the resurrection trump, the judgment-bar, the righteous Judge, the glories of heaven and the gloom of hell, the gospel's cheering sound, the sacred tears of Gethsemane, the blood of Calvary and the sweet yet awful breathings of the Holy Ghost. The preacher's mission is to lay hold of perishing men, and by the love of the Redeemer drag them from the pit. His only motive is disinterested zeal, and if he harbours any other, he is compelled for decency's sake to conceal it and affect the former.

Now, the first element of good taste is appropriateness. Grand and weighty themes least admit fanciful ornament. The tracery which might be graceful around the pediments of a cottage would be tawdry if applied to a lofty temple. This must be majestic and severe in its simplicity. What a demand is there here for profound and ingenuous feeling also! How unspeakably inappropriate every artifice which betrays the impulse of self-display! The preacher, to be consistent with his professed attitude, should be instinct with earnest-

ness. But who does not know that the eloquence of native emotion is always simple? When the wail of the bereaved mother rises from the bedside of her dying child, it has no artifice; you have heard it, and know that our art cannot equal its power! When the story of his wrongs bursts from the lips of the indignant patriot, and he consecrates himself upon the altar of father-land, it is in simple words. When the despairing soul raises to his Saviour the cry, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" he speaks unaffectedly. Let me urge it, then, with all the emphasis which language can convey, that an unaffected and direct style is the very first dictate of propriety and good taste for him who speaks of the gospel. To turn away the mind's eye for one moment from these overpowering realities, toward the artifices of rhetoric, is the most heinous sin against rhetoric. It is as though the man who desired to arouse his neighbour, asleep in a burning house, should bethink himself of the melody of the tones in which he cried "FIRE." It is as though the champion, fighting for his hearthstone and his household, should waste his thoughts on the beauty of his limbs and attitudes.

Do I advocate, then, a simplicity so bald as to exclude every figure? By no means. A certain class of figures is the very language of nature. Such we should use in their proper place. They are those figures which, every one sees, are used to set forth the subject and not the speaker. They are those which the mind spontaneously seizes when enlarged and strengthened by the earnestness of its emotions, and welds them by the heat of its action into the very substance of its thought. Such ornaments are distinguished at a glance from the

epithets, tropes and similes which the artificial mind collects with its eye prevalently turned all the time to its own meed of applause. Within the strict bounds of this directness and simplicity, there is ample scope for the exercise of genius and imagination. Indeed, it is when a vigorous logic and truly original imagination are stimulated by the most intense heat of emotion, that the noblest simplicity of style and, at the same time, the grandest imagery are combined.

There is with me no stronger conviction, than that the speaker should never attempt to rescue his discourse from baldness and tameness, by resorting to tropes collected with deliberate design. The moment an ornament is felt to be introduced with "malice prepense," it becomes a deformity. There is a rule of architecture propounded for some styles by the greatest masters which we might profitably adopt. It is that while every essential member of the structure shall be so proportioned as to be ornamental, no ornament shall be admitted which is not essential to the construction, no bracket which has nothing to strengthen, no column which has nothing to sustain. The proper sources of rhetorical beauty are, next to true genius, in the warmth of an honest, earnest emotion, and a clear, logical apprehension of the truth discussed. Unless our ornaments come spontaneously from this, their proper mint, they will inevitably be counterfeit. When, therefore, the preacher finds, after he has done all in the composition of his sermon which clear definition, affluence of knowledge, just arrangement and sound logic can effect, that his work is still tame and cold, it is worse than useless for him to seek for artificial imagery. He should seek

Christian feeling. He needs to sacrifice, not at the shrine of the Muse of eloquence, but at the altar of the Holy Ghost.

Remember that men have a perception of consistency which is intuitive with them. Education and culture are not needed to confer this; they may rather blunt it by sophisticating the judgment and mental habits. That which is heartless and calculated will inevitably be detected. But when the hearer perceives artifice he will impute it to a selfish motive, and for him there is an end of right impression. You may plead that your expedient is prompted by a well-meaning desire to commend the gospel. He will not believe you; he will urge with truth that the natural language of disinterestedness is simplicity, as the natural garb of vanity is artifice; he will persist in imputing the latter as your motive.

Observe here, also, that if from our perverted training an artificial manner has become second nature to us, this will not prevent the mischief. To the perception of the hearer who has not been thus perversely trained, it still seems artificial, and he naturally concludes that it is purposely such. It is not enough, then, for you to say that it is really "your manner;" that in you it is no longer artificial, but a second nature. You should inquire how it became "your manner;" whether by giving free course to an ingenuous and ardent love for souls, or by listening to the whispers of conceit and the seduction of applause in your imitative season.

But what hearer is so dull as not to feel, when innate perception detects this heartlessness, that if the preacher really believed what he proclaimed, and felt what he professed for dying souls, he could have neither time

nor heart to think of self-display? There will be a conclusion, perhaps scarcely conscious, yet influential, that either this speaker does not believe his own words, when he tells him of his hanging over hell-fire and of love divine stooping to his rescue, or that if he does, he must have the heart of a serpent to be seeking the trivial indulgence of vanity in the presence of truths so sacred and dire. And, indeed, my young brethren, how repulsive is the selfishness of him who, believing these gospel themes, can desecrate them to the tricking forth of his own rhetorical fame! I have seen somewhere this story of Parrhasius (I know not that it is authentic), the gifted but selfish and unprincipled Greek painter, that when he was engaged upon one of his master-pieces, the Prometheus chained by Vulcan to the crag of Mount Caucasus and consumed by an immortal vulture, he purchased a venerable and noble old man from among the Olynthian captives sold by Philip of Macedon, as a model. When he had brought his painting to such a stage that he was ready to give the finishing touches to the face of the figure, designed to express a mortal and yet an undying agony, he bound his victim on a rack beside his easel, and there tormented him to death with a nice and delicate deliberation, that he might catch the exact lineaments of the death anguish, and transfer them to his picture. Do you shudder at the cruel, the fiendish ambition of this pagan? He could coolly witness, yea, cause, the mortal pangs, and despise the entreaty of a fellow-creature, hapless and helpless, venerable and innocent, that he might perfect with the shadows of his woes the work upon which he built his selfish fame! By how much

is that man less heartless, who deliberately traffics in the terrors of eternity to deck and trim his reputation ; who gathers the groans and the gloom of the pit of eternal torment, and dips his pencil in the blackness of his fellow-creature's despair to add impressiveness to his work of self-display ; nay, who dares to lay his hand on the glories of the cross and the sacred pangs of Calvary, at which guilty man should only shudder and weep, to flaunt them before a gaping crowd as the trappings of his skill ? Nothing can rescue him from the condemnation of a cold and cruel impiety save his unbelief ; he can be excused only on the plea that he regards these dread facts as serious fables.

Must your auditors believe, then, that the pastor who, out of the pulpit, is a humane and courteous gentleman, who shows himself sincerely ready to relieve the temporal ills of his fellow-men, is thus savagely heartless ? No ; they will adopt the other alternative : they will conclude, it may be half-consciously, that you are not in earnest. Thus, artificial preaching gives pretext for infidelity. He who speaks thus will never be made the power of God and the wisdom of God to salvation to them that believe.

The remedy for this fault must be sought in the cultivation of the heart at the throne of grace, in the increase of our faith and in the revivifying of our love. When we believe and feel like a Davies, a Whitefield, an Ambrose, a Paul, then we may preach like them. Only a genuine piety will produce a genuine simplicity. An artificial simplicity, while rhetorically more correct, is, in the sight of Him who searcheth the heart, but a more refined and skilful sin. Let me guard myself

here. Do we seek the virtue of simplicity in style, do we forego prurient, excessive and ill-assimilated ornament, only because our more cultivated taste tells us that this is the truer art and the readier way to win a higher praise for eloquence? Is this the only feeling which animates our condemnation and contempt, when we reprehend our more ignorant and misguided comrades? If this be so, then, while we may be acquitted at the bar of our science, at the bar of conscience we are still found guilty of the impiety. Let us fall before our Master and say, "Woe is me, for I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips." Send, O Lord, "a live coal taken from off the altar, and lay it upon my mouth; and say, Lo, this hath touched thy lips, and thine iniquity is taken away and thy sin purged."