

LECTURE VII.

CARDINAL REQUISITES OF THE SERMON.

WE have now reached a subject which may be regarded as intermediate between the department of Invention and that of Disposition. This is the consideration of the general qualities which must characterize the structure of every sermon. These may be called the cardinal virtues of this species of discourse. Some of them are common to all orations; some are peculiar to the sermon. They are *Textual Fidelity, Unity, Instructiveness, Evangelical Tone, Movement, Point and Order*. I shall now proceed to explain and enforce each of them.

The quality of *textual fidelity* will be easily comprehended, if you recall the preacher's position as the deliverer of a message. The people roughly but accurately express it by the phrase "sticking to one's text." It is simply a strict fidelity throughout the discussion to the subject and teachings of the text. The best argument to enforce upon you this virtue is suggested by the same fact—that the preacher is a herald. The first quality of the good herald is the faithful delivery of the very mind of his king. Our conception of our office, and of the revealed word as an infinitely wise rule for man's salvation, permits us to discuss the text in no other spirit. Our business with it is to commend

God's own meaning in it—nothing more, nothing less, to every man's conscience in his sight. Our task is to impress God's own die, as he has engraved it, upon the plastic soul, that we may produce his image.

But textual fidelity also secures us important ends besides the high and sacred one of obedience to our charge. It is a means for securing unity, which, as we shall see anon, is also essential to good discourse; for if the text is discreetly chosen so as to contain one main subject, and if the discourse is faithful to the text, this is itself a sufficient guarantee that unity will not be fatally wounded. Textual fidelity will give you that of which the young pastor often feels so great need—fruitfulness and variety of matter. Those who are inexperienced in discourse imagine that they secure copiousness by allowing themselves to ramble. But they are mistaken. It is the steady contemplation of definite truth in its definite relations which enriches the mind with instructive thoughts. If your powers are relieved of this labour by the permission to rove, they will remain barren and unawakened, and will run the narrow round of your familiar commonplaces. This remark leads to another, that the habit of wandering from your text is in the end wasteful of your stores. You may have relieved the vacuity of your minds by introducing foreign matter, but you will find to your cost that you have thus anticipated and used important topics which should have furnished you other independent discussions. Thus, the tyro has a text which sets forth the great evangelical grace of repentance. Instead of studying it thoroughly, and pouring out some of the rich stores of instruction and appeal which this

Christian sentiment furnishes, he indolently attempts to supply his barrenness by some commonplaces upon the subject of faith, justifying his expedient upon the ground that the text-books tell him faith and repentance are twin graces. The consequence is that a few weeks after, when he would preach upon faith, he finds that he has forestalled himself; the fundamental propositions on that subject (because familiar) have been recently uttered by him, and his present discussion must either be repetitious or fragmentary.

It is usually wise to extend this fidelity to the text, not only to its abstract doctrine, but to its imagery. Let the sermon wear, in the main, the same figurative drapery with the passage on which it is founded. The reason for this is, that as we trust the infallibility of the divine doctrine, so we may always trust the appropriateness of the inspired rhetoric, except where a change of usage and habits of thought have reversed the ancient associations attached to the images. Besides, it will be the pastor's duty to present oftentimes the same capital truths. He will often find occasion to remind his charge, with the apostle, that "to teach the same things to him indeed is not burdensome, and for them it is safe." It will then be a great gain to the freshness of his preaching to throw over his subject, in imitation of his text, the new colouring of a new trope. And this is more than a mere advantage of style; for as every just metaphor suggests some true parallelisms of relations belonging to the thing represented, the new figurative dress will teach us some additional element of the truth. The great doctrine of the new birth, for instance, is represented as an opening of blind eyes also,

and as a quickening of dead souls. Each of these tropes presents the truth in new aspects. Let the preacher avail himself of their variety and instructiveness. But in doing this he must carefully guard against excess, and see to it that he does not expand a metaphor into a vicious allegory. Let not the preacher, enforcing the admonition of Prov. xxix. 1, "He that, being often reprov'd, hardeneth his neck shall be suddenly destroyed, and that without remedy," make the impenitent sinner an ox throughout his discourse. Here a severe judgment and taste must be his guard.

Unity is necessary to every work of art—to the oration, the drama, the poem, the painting, the architectural structure, the statue. There is no canon of rhetoric more universally admitted than this, which demands unity in discourse. But what is this quality? It is not sameness or singleness of idea. It does not forbid variety, diversity, nor even contrast, in the subordinate parts. Nature's unity is full of variety. It is not that singleness which the dialectician expresses by unicity, but it is the combination of parts into one whole. It is a component individuality which gives unity to art. Hence, so far is it from being true that the aggregation of several parts destroys it, we may see that unless there be more than one part there will be no unity, but unicity only. Unity is what results from union. The requisition of this quality, then, in its severest form, does not exclude the widest range of variety in thought and illustration. Indeed, it is sometimes most strikingly displayed by combining things diverse, or even contrasted, to enhance one effect. Thus, in Hogarth's picture of a market scene, designed to produce

the sentiment of the grotesque, amidst every angular and ungainly figure which his fancy could group together, he has introduced a greyhound. The graceful and flowing outlines of this animal enhance by contrast the main effect. The fable of Laocoön has been immortalized by two arts, the pen of the classic poet and the chisel of the sculptor. The resultant impression designed in the reader or spectator is that of sympathetic horror. The athletic frame of the father, with his herculean muscles strained with agony, is in the strongest contrast with the almost feminine softness of the limbs of his sons. But all are enfolded in the resistless coils of the dragons, against which manly vigour is as impotent as infantile grace. In like manner, should the preacher's aim be to dismiss his hearers with the most distinct and impressive feeling of the worth of the soul, he may enforce it by ideas as remote from each other as heaven from hell, by the preciousness of the joys of the saved and by the miseries of the lost.

Affirmatively, rhetorical unity requires these two things. The speaker must, first, have one main subject of discourse, to which he adheres with supreme reference throughout. But this is not enough. He must, second, propose to himself one definite impression on the hearer's soul, to the making of which everything in the sermon is bent.¹ You will remember that the

¹ Quum igitur . . . rem tractare cœpi, nihil prius constituo quam quid sit illud, quo mihi referenda sit omnis illa oratio, quæ sit propria quæstionis et iudicii; deinde quorum alterum . . . est accommodatum ad eorum animos, apud quos dicimus, ad il quod volumus, commovendos.—*Cic. de Orat.*, b. ii., ch. 27. § 114.

distinguishing trait of the oration is that it is always practical, that it concludes by saying to the hearer, "Do this," that its *terminus* is in a volition, and that its aim is to pass through the understanding into the motives of the soul. Unity of discourse requires, then, not only singleness of a dominant subject, but also singleness of practical impression. To secure the former, see to it that the whole discussion may admit of reduction to a single proposition. To secure the latter, let the preacher hold before him, through the whole preparation of the sermon, the one practical effect intended to be produced upon the hearer's will.

You will now, I think, have little difficulty in determining with what this unity may or may not consist. All digressions, episodes and corollaries are not sins against it. If they lead the hearer's soul away from the one chief end of the discourse, if their result is to divide or abstract any power of attention or feeling from that end, they are excrescences. But if, while they seem to open side channels of thought or emotion, their current returns and debouches into the main one, so as to add volume and *momentum* to it, then they are legitimate. The discourse may have only the greater beauty and force because of an apparent diversion of the progress. On the other hand, unity is often violated by introducing too many explanatory topics. It is marred by a range of exposition wider or more protracted than is necessary for distinctly apprehending the main proposition. You have correctly inferred, from my assertion that all true preaching must be expository of the Word, that I give great weight to the context. But its discussion should be extended no farther than is needed to

place the meaning of the Holy Spirit, in the text, in its proper connection of thought. This rule must be strictly observed; for otherwise, since all sacred truths are connected among themselves, there might be no limit to the trespasses committed upon the unity of the text. So it is vicious to intrude an illustration or an episode only for the sake of the piquancy of the thing introduced. What is this but to sacrifice the fruit to the foliage, the end to the means? Perhaps it is a more important caution to remind you, that unity is by no means secured by a series of remarks which are all upon the subject of the same proposition. Let it be, "Faith justifies us." A number of pious remarks about faith may be made, each one of which shall be scriptural. (A definition, for instance, of its nature; a reference to its source in the grace of the Holy Ghost; a discussion of its perpetuity; an examination of its warrant; a description of its effects on the heart and life.) The preacher imagines that he is very faithfully discoursing of faith all the time; and yet it is manifest that there is no convergency whatever in these several remarks. They may be all referred to the same subject, and yet point as diversely as the *radii* which issue in opposite directions from the same centre. The proper image of rhetorical unity is not found in the star, which scatters its rays on every side from one point of light, to be absorbed and lost in the darkness of space, but in the lens, which collects many parallel or even dissentient rays into one burning *focus*. But to return to the proposition cited in our instance: if all the remarks of the discourse had a true bearing upon the copula or affirmation, "Justification *is* by faith," then there

would be a necessary unity. I need not detain you to show at length that the connection of truth with truth and doctrine with doctrine constitutes no plea for heaping one upon another in the same discourse. Regeneration implies original sin. He who should therefore claim that a full discussion of the new birth must include a discussion of our fall in Adam, has not the first conception of rhetorical unity. By the same argument it would follow that, since all truth is connected, each sermon must be a complete *syllabus* in theology. These two results would then be inevitable: that there could be but one sermon in substance, and that this one sermon must remain for ever a *bare syllabus*. The hearers would therefore never gain a full and impressive view of any one point of Christian theology; they could never receive more than a barren smattering of sacred knowledge.

There was a very pious and venerable class of ministers who insisted, more plausibly, upon a canon which violated unity in another way. Their rule was that no sermon was correct unless, whatever the text, it included a statement of the whole plan of salvation, sufficiently detailed to be understood and embraced, with the aid of the Spirit, by a soul which heard it then for the first and last time. Their reason for this requirement was, that the preacher could never know but that there was some ignorant soul present who was destined not to hear the gospel again. You will not understand me, in dissenting from this pious rule, as retracting anything I have urged upon the duty of continually holding up the cross. I will admit that a missionary, who preaches transiently to ignorant and destitute per-

sons to whom he will not soon return, should honour the spirit of the precept by preferring uniformly texts which contain the very marrow of the gospel. But then, he will be able to expound the way of salvation without violating unity, or taking liberties with the meaning of God's word. Textual fidelity will then not only permit, but require, the presentation of those cardinal truths which are suited to the soul enjoying its last opportunity of salvation. But the ordinary pastor who meets his people frequently should limit himself in compliance with the demands of unity, lest, by attempting to make all his sermons comprehensive of the whole system of redemption, he should make them all meagre.

Having thus defined unity of discourse, I add that it is demanded by the very nature of the mind. If image follows image before our attention, without any tie between them, the impression of the second obliterates that made by the first. There can be no cumulative effect. But if the several topics are convergent toward the same conviction of mind and purpose of will, the second promotes the impression begun by the first. The hearer's soul is consequently borne toward the designed *terminus* by the accelerating force of the whole, and a powerful effect is produced. Unity is as essential to strength as to beauty. The sermon which lacks this quality can only do good by accident. "The words of the wise," saith Solomon, "are as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd." The nail is only driven home by successive blows upon the same spot. The engineer who would batter a breach in the enemy's wall does not

scatter his cannon-shot. He makes all his guns converge upon a single spot. Thus an irresistible force is applied, before which no masonry can stand, while by the opposite method he would only have scratched the whole surface of the fortress, without breaking down any part.

The next property of the good sermon I have named *evangelical tone*. This is a gracious character, appropriate to the proclamation of that gospel where "mercy and truth meet together, and righteousness and peace kiss each other." It qualifies both the matter and manner of the sermon. To superinduce upon matter not evangelical the preacher's unction of style and delivery would be unnatural and almost impossible; for it is a fact worthy of notice that a purely secular oratory, like that of the Pagan classics, presents of this quality no trace. To deliver evangelical matter in any other tone is inappropriate to the preacher's attitude, as a ransomed sinner honoured to become the herald of the law and of mercy to the lost. First, then, this attitude dictates that the matter of the sermon shall be prevalently evangelical. We cannot better describe it than in the words of the apostles, when they so frequently speak of their work as "preaching Christ," or "preaching Christ crucified." We do not conceive that they mean to declare, the only facts they ever recited were those enacted on Calvary, or that they limited themselves exclusively to the one doctrine of vicarious satisfaction for sin. The abstracts of their sermons, recorded in the New Testament, show that this was not true. But we find that these facts and this doctrine were central to their teachings. They recurred perpetually with a prominence

suitable to their importance. More than this, they were ever near at hand, as the *focus* to which every beam of divine truth must converge. The whole revealed system, with its doctrines and duties, was ever presented in gospel aspects. The law, when preached as a rule of conviction, led to the cross. The law, as a rule of obedience, drew its noblest sanctions from the cross. Such being the method of the inspired men, I would willingly define evangelical preaching by the term scriptural. Let the preacher present all doctrines and duties, not in the lights of philosophy or of human ethics, but of the New Testament. And for enforcement of this quality I cannot do better than refer you to the apostle's declaration, that when he came to preach among the Coriuthians (1 Eph. ii. 2) he "determined not to know anything among them, save Jesus Christ and him crucified."

The testimony of Church history and of man's spiritual instincts, to the superior and abiding power of evangelical matter over the soul, has been already briefly cited. All the great preachers, from the apostles to our day, whom God has honoured to revive and bless his Church, have been evangelical: Ambrose, Augustine, Chrysostom, the Reformers, the orthodox Puritans, Whitefield, the Wesleys, the Tennents, Davies, Chalmers, Summerfield, Nettleton. The pure gospel usually attracts the multitude of those who hunger after God, while the Ritualist and the moralizing pulpit philosophers, after the tinsel of novelty is lost, parade their wares before empty benches.

Evangelical tone includes also that quality which is happily denoted by the French divines, *unction*. - This

term is suggested by that scriptural trope which so frequently represents the effusion of the Holy Ghost as an anointing from God.¹ It expresses, therefore, as you will easily apprehend, that temperature of thought and elocution, which the Spirit of all grace sheds upon the heart possessed by the blessed truths of the gospel. It is not identical with animation. Every passion in the preacher does not constitute unction. While it does not expel intellectual activity, authority and will, it super-fuses these elements of force with the love, the pity, the tenderness, the pure zeal, the seriousness, which the topics of redemption should shed upon the soul of a ransomed and sanctified sinner. It is defined by *Vinet* as "the general savour of Christianity, a gravity accompanied by tenderness, a severity tempered with sweetness, a majesty associated with intimacy." Blair calls it "gravity and warmth united." Its necessity to the happiest effect of preaching will be apprehended, without other argument, if you simply represent to yourselves the sentiments with which the soul eminently pervaded by the grace of the Holy Ghost would undertake the sacred and merciful work of the gospel proclamation to guilty fellow-men. The most complete conception of the quality is that ideal which you derive, from the Evangelists, of the temper of the preaching of Jesus Christ. To deliver such a message as his, without any tincture of his temper, must ever be felt as a harsh solecism. To affect unction is manifestly impossible. It is, in short, a quality not merely intellectual or sentimental, but spiritual. Although not

¹ See, for instance, 1 John ii. 27.

identical with ardent piety, it is the effluence of ardent piety alone. A correct taste alone cannot communicate it. It cannot be taught by rhetoric alone. It cannot be acquired from imitation of others. But it is the Holy Spirit who communicates it to the cultivated mind and pure taste, by enduing the soul which is thus prepared with an ardent zeal for God's glory and a tender compassion for those who are perishing. Thus we are led from another quarter to the same conclusion—that only the eminent Christian can be an eminent preacher of the gospel.

Continuing this subject, I remark that every good sermon is *instructive*. This quality is not the same with that which distinguishes the doctrinal discourse; for it should pervade all practical and narrative sermons as well. It is to enforce this obligation, especially as to these kinds of discourses, that I give place to instructiveness as one of the general virtues of the preacher. It is not that quality described by the phrase "intellectual preaching," in the affected dialect of the day. The odious thing intended by the latter is a sort of religioso-philosophic and human speculation, which is ambitious of profundity, and which a covert pedantry inflates. But the instructive sermon is that which abounds in food for the understanding. It is full of thought, and richly informs the mind of the hearer. It is opposed, of course, to vapid and commonplace compositions; but it is opposed also to those which seek to reach the will through rhetorical ornament and passionate sentiment, without establishing rational conviction. The instructive sermon will have an important subject; it will be rich in matter and will communicate

solid knowledge. It will exhibit truth in its rational connections, so that the hearer shall feel himself advanced and established in a firm system. But this food for the mind must be none other than scriptural food. He would greatly abuse my meaning, who should make this requisition for instructiveness a pretext for intruding foreign and secular information into the pulpit. Thus the question recurs, whether he who limits himself strictly to the circle of revealed truths will find enough to make all his sermons rich in matter. Again I answer, with confidence, that he will. But I do not conceal the truth that, in order for this, he must be a man of diligent study and of ripe acquirements. He need not expect to possess this virtue who is not mighty in the Scriptures and thoroughly informed in their theology. He must have obeyed the injunction of the apostle to Timothy (1 Epis. iv. 13, etc.), "Give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine." . . . "Meditate on these things; give thyself wholly to them, that thy profiting may appear unto all." But such a pastor will always find, in the exposition of the Scriptures to his people, in the defence of the doctrines and order of his Church, in the application of these principles to the diversified exigencies of their consciences, abundant stores of thought to enrich all his sermons. If, after selecting his subject, he does not find this affluence of matter, let him accuse his own ignorance and set about informing it.

The necessity of instructiveness in all sermons appears from the same considerations by which I urged frequent doctrinal preaching. Religion is an intelligent concern, and deals with man as a reasoning creature.

Sanctification is by the truth. To move men we must instruct. No Christian can be stable and consistent save as he is intelligent. Instruction alone can prevent revivals from becoming mischievous excitements, and Christian zeal from degenerating into fanatical heat. Let it be considered, in addition, that the desire to know, or rational curiosity, is the natural appetite of the mind, and that knowledge is its proper food. Knowledge is the light of the soul, and as sweet as the light is to the eye so pleasant is truth to the mind. It is true that the understanding is conscious of a species of *vis inertiae*, and that an effort is often necessary to rouse it to the labour of apprehension. But that effort is wholesome and cheerful. The desire to know is one of the most vivid sentiments of the soul, and its gratification is one of the purest and most unobscuring pleasures of our nature. The apostle¹ enumerates it among the elements which compose the immortal bliss of heaven. Hence, you may securely rely upon instructiveness as an unfailing power to attract the people permanently to your ministry. If you would not wear out after you have ceased to be a novelty, give the minds of your people food. Young pastors not seldom yield to a timidity, lest the multitude should be repelled by the homeliness of the truth; and they imagine that they are catering better for the popular tastes, by relieving them of the labour of attention and amusing them with rhetorical pyrotechnics. I do not here remark upon the wickedness of such an expedient. Pastoral experience proves that it is not adapted to its end, low as

¹ 1 Cor. xiii. 12.

that end is. The men who draw the multitude are (if we except those who have more successfully satisfied the depravity of our race by positive error) the instructive pastors. The crowd flocks a few times to behold the empty show. But when it feels the necessity of being fed, it resorts to the place where solid food is provided for the mind, even if it be with plainer equipage. Make your people feel that they are gaining permanent acquisitions of knowledge from you, and they will not desert you.¹

¹ I once asked a sensible, plain man, who was familiar with the popular oratory of Randolph, what was its charm with the common people. He did not mention, as I expected he would, his magic voice, his classic grace, the purity of his English, his intense passion, the energy of his will, his pungent wit, his sarcasm, or the inimitable aptitude of his illustration. But he answered: "It was because Mr. Randolph was so instructive; he taught the people so much which they had not known before."