

CHAPTER III.

DISPOSITION OR DIVISION.

We come to the second part of Homiletics, the Disposition or proper division of the text or topic of discourse, and the arrangement of the material gathered. It may be called homiletics proper, being the scientific or systematic part in the preparation of sermons.

Rightly to divide the word of truth is among the highest arts and attainments of the preacher, and a strong element of pulpit power. It is a gift in which all do not share alike but which all should diligently cultivate.

Some recent homiletical writers speak of it as of no importance, and rather a hindrance than an aid to successful preaching. Their argument is that a carefully elaborated plan of discourse gives a stiff and artificial form to sermons, and interferes with that flexibility of mind and style which ought rather to be encouraged and cultivated. But surely the wise preacher need not sacrifice flexibility and variety because he employs a form or plan and works by rule. Who would erect a house, or fight a battle without first forming a plan of action in minute detail, with careful and exact arrangement? No argument is convincing which is not logical, and this which is ridiculed as "homiletical machinery" is simply the application of the rules and methods of logic to the preparation of sermons.

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Massilon, when asked which of his sermons he considered the best, replied, "that which I memorized the most readily." It was an answer and judgment worth remembering as the test of a sermon. If it cannot be memorized easily and recalled readily, it reveals a lack of logical arrangement, of clearness of argument, and an absence of skilful plan in which one point naturally suggests and leads to the next. A clear-cut division of the text or subject matter of the discourse, well expressed, is an element of strength in any sermon. These divisions furnish not only heads of discourse, but handles on which the minds of the hearers lay hold and carry the substance of the sermon in memory.

Doubtless, some preachers make their many and minute divisions and points too prominent in their sermons, which gives them a stiffness that is unnatural and wearisome. This is a serious blunder, but it is no argument against having divisions and points of discourse. No man is expected to go about exhibiting the bones which form the skeleton of his body, but woe be to his body if there are no bones or if they are out of joint. Nature covers up the bones with flesh and conceals them, but they must be in place and each joined to its fellow.

In public speech every man will have *some* arrangement or plan of discourse—he will present one phase or part first, another secondly, and another thirdly ;—the only question is—*which is the best way?* It certainly is easier for the preacher to speak according to a carefully premeditated plan than to indulge in an illogical and disconnected ha-

range, whilst the influence and benefit to the hearers are of the highest value. After all, it is the man of method, rather than of surprising genius, who does the best work, and on whom the world must rely.

We urge, therefore, a careful cultivation of this part of your work and to aim to excel in it. It will make the preparation of sermons an easy, interesting, and delightful occupation, and give a charm and impressiveness in their delivery which no other feature can do.

RULES FOR MAIN DIVISIONS.

Every sermon has three parts; the introduction, the discussion, and the conclusion. It is in the second of these that the disposition or division of the text or topic appears; *i.e.*, the different parts are separated and properly arranged for presentation, discussion, and illustration. It is in this the homiletical ability or tact of the preacher will appear, and on it much of the strength and success of the sermon will depend. Before stating and illustrating, therefore, the various methods of division, we give some rules for main divisions, and also some statements concerning the subdivisions into which these main divisions are divided.

1. Main divisions should be few in number. The purpose of the main division often is simply to state the order and succession of parts into which the text or topic is divided, and these should not be many. Too many divisions weaken a sermon, making it appear as a bush rather than as a tree. The

usual threefold division is neither arbitrary nor mere custom ; it is both natural and logical. If a text requires over four main divisions, it is better to shorten the text than increase their number. Where a lengthy passage is taken, the various points can generally be arranged as subdivisions, leaving the main divisions to be few in number.

[Thus a sermon on the Beatitudes (Matt. v : 3-12) need have but two general heads,-I. The blessedness of Christianity; and, II. The persons who find it. Or a sermon on the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke xviii: 10-14) would cover all points by this division: I. Wherein they agreed, and II. Wherein they differed.]

2. They should be expressed in terse form and good language. Divisions, like themes, should be couched in short, striking sentences, clear and clean cut. A lengthy, indefinite, and carelessly constructed sentence is a blemish anywhere, but especially in the chief heads of a sermon. Some preachers have carried their divisions into rhyme; others adorn them by alliteration, etc. Whilst avoiding any extremes which would only interfere with the proper effect of the sermon,-elegance of expression should mark the chief divisions.

3. They should cover or include the entire text. Every important part of the text should thus be made prominent. Whatever a preacher announces as his text, he ought to preach on the whole of it, as otherwise it might seem as if he kept back some fact or truth, and failed to declare the whole counsel of God. It is better to announce only so much

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of the Divine Word as your text as you intend to preach on, - and let your main divisions cover all you announce. It is not necessary to "exhaust the text," but present all its points.

4. Nothing should be made a chief head of a sermon which is not **in the text or legitimately connected with it**. They need not be directly expressed in the text; they may be only implied in it, but must be connected with it and not be irrelevant to it.

5. Nothing should be made a main division which is **properly a sub-division** of another head. Every division should really divide, *i.e.* be a separate and distinct part, and not implied or covered by another part.

6. There must be **unity of design and correspondence** with each other in the main divisions. They should be like successive halls or chambers or stories of a house, leading naturally and fittingly from one to another. They must also have similarity of form or expression, *i.e.*, if one be a proposition, all must be propositions; if one a question, all must be questions; if one a simple title, all must be titles, etc.

SUB-DIVISIONS.

Sub-divisions are the minor divisions into which the main divisions naturally divide themselves, or consist in such particular facts, truths, or questions as are necessary to bring out the meaning, discussion, or application of the main divisions.

Such sub-divisions may sometimes require sub-sub-divisions, in order to present separately the various points contained in them.

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These several divisions are usually indicated by different figures or letters of the alphabet, each class or kind of division having the same kind of sign; thus:

AN EXAMPLE OF DIVISION AND ITS SIGNS.

REV. iii: 8. .. *Behold I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it.*"

I. THE OPEN DOOR.

(A.) *The door described.*

- (a) A door of escape. From (1) Our state of sin and guilt.
(2) In which we were hopelessly imprisoned.
- (b) A door of entrance. Into (1) A state of grace, (2) and salvation.
- (c) A door of service. (1) To proclaim His word, and (2) do His will.

(B.) *The way it was opened.*

- (a) Not by human power, skill, or merit.
- (b) But by the atonement of Christ.
- (c) The power of the Spirit, through the Gospel.

II. ITS PUBLIC MANIFESTATION. .. I have set before thee."

(A.) *The manner.*

- (a) In the teachings of His word.
- (b) In the institution and services of His church.
- (c) In repeated providential purposes.

(B.) *The purpose.*

- (a) Not for mere admiration, or curious discoveries.
- (b) But for use. That we may escape, enter, and serve.

III. THE EFFORTS OF MEN TO SHUT IT. "No man can shut it."

(A.) *By various means.*

- (a) By persecutions and oppositions.
- (b) By denying Christ's atonement.
- (c) By unscriptural limitations of it.
- (d) By unbelief.

(B.) *Without success.*

- (a) The door is still open.
- (b) It can be closed only by Him who opened it.

In preaching a sermon which has not been previously written out, there is a great advantage in having minute divisions of the subject, as it will help the preacher to recall the various points he wishes to make, and at the same time keep from repeating what he has already said.

Sub-divisions constitute the most important part of the sermon. While the main divisions relate chiefly to the mode of discussion or state the order of parts, the sub-divisions deal with the subject-matter of the sermon directly. If the main divisions raise questions, the sub-divisions must give the answers in solid facts and truths. They are the soldiers in the ranks which do the fighting, and the laborers in the field who do the work. Many preachers are content with preparing an outline with main divisions only, and fail to elaborate the minor divisions which are of far greater importance.

We give the following sources for obtaining suitable sub-divisions, with examples under each:

First. The main divisions often furnish their own sub-divisions in the words or suggestions of the text.

An example of this is seen in II. Tim. iv: 7-8.

I. THE LIFE PAUL LIVED.

1. "Fought a good fight." 2. "Kept the faith." 3. "Finished his course."

II. THE PROSPECT HE POSSESSED.

1. A glorious crown. "A crown of righteousness."

2. A grand coronation. "Which the Lord shall give me."

3. A goodly fellowship. "All them that love His appearing."

Second. The context, especially when a narrative, may supply the sub-divisions.

Example: Luke vii: 9. "I have not found so great faith," etc.

I. THE CENTURION'S FAITH. It was seen in :

- (1) His confidence in Christ's power (vs. 8).
- (2) The humility he manifested (vs. 6).
- (3) His compassion for his servant (vs. 2).
- (4) His beneficence to God's people (vs. 5).

II. CHRIST'S COMMENDATION OF IT. It was "great" :

- (1) Because of his nationality. He was a Gentile.
- (2) Because of his occupation. He was a man of war.
- (3) Because it was so rare. "No, not in Israel."

Third. The parallel passages sometimes suggest them.

Example: John x : 11. "I am the good shepherd," etc.

I. JESUS OUR SHEPHERD.

1. A great shepherd (Heb. xiii: 20).
2. The only shepherd (Ezek. xxxvii: 24).
3. A spiritual overseer (I. Pet. ii: 25).
4. He seeks and delivers (Ezek. xxxiv: 12).
5. He feeds, sustains and leads (Isa. xl : 11).
6. He rewards and honors (I Pet. v : 4).

II. JESUS OUR SACRIFICE.

1. By death (Heb. ix: 12).
2. There is no other (Heb. ix: 26).

3. It was sufficient (Heb. ix : 14).
4. It was vicarious (Rom. v: 6).
5. It was universal (II. Cor. v : 15).
6. From love (Rom. v : 8).

Fourth. When the text refers to any historical event or fact, the particulars of such event or fact will furnish subdivisions.

Example: Luke xvii: 32. "Remember Lot's wife."

[This refers to the narrative recorded in Gen. xix., and from its perusal we gain the subdivisions.]

I. REMEMBER HER ADVANTAGES.

1. The wife of a religious man.
2. Entertained angels.
3. Heard their message (vs. 12),
4. Saw their power (vs. 11).
5. Was delivered from Sodom [vs. 16].

II. REMEMBER HER SIN.

1. Seemed a small thing. **She** "looked back."
2. But was a violation of a direct command. (vs. 17.)
3. Revealed the state of her heart.

III. REMEMBER HER PUNISHMENT. "She became a pillar of salt" (vs. 26).

1. It was swift.
2. It was severe.
3. After she had escaped from Sodom.
4. A warning to others. (Idea of "a pillar").

Fifth. When the language of the text is figurative, good points for sub-divisions may be indicated by the figure employed. Care must be had however not to carry such figures or

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points of comparison to extremes which may be ridiculous.

Example: Matt. v: 15. "Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick," etc.

Here are three suggestive figures or comparisons:

I. THE CANDLE. This suggests:

1. Our religion must be luminous.
2. Delightful and attractive.
3. It is limited.. Christ is the Sun; Christians only like candles or lamps which must be lit, and give only limited light.

II. THE BUSHEL. Many cover their religion with:

1. Common things. Most excuses are ridiculous.
2. Especially with business matters. "Bushels" are business utensils.

III. THE CANDLESTICK.

1. Our religion should be conspicuous.
2. Well-fitted and consistent.
3. Always convenient for use.

Sixth. When a main division requires definition, argument, or proof, such various definitions, arguments, or proofs will furnish the subdivisions.

Example: Matt. xvii: 16. "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

The theme here is the divinity of the Saviour.

I. ITS DEMONSTRATION.

1. From the prophecies He fulfilled..
2. The truths He proclaimed.

3. The deeds He performed.
4. The triumph He achieved.

II. ITS DEMANDS.

1. Our faith and trust.
2. Our submission and compliance.
3. Our consecration and service.
4. Our adoration and praise.

Seventh. Things implied in or inferred from the text or the main divisions will supply proper sub-divisions.

Example: Ps. xvii: 15. "I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness."

I. THE THINGS IMPLIED IN THE TEXT.

1. This world cannot satisfy the soul.
2. Even though our circumstances be as favorable as those of the Psalmist King.

II. THE THINGS TAUGHT IN THE TEXT.

1. There must be an awakening in his likeness.

This takes place *Ca.*) When we become believers (Eph. v: 14).

(b.) At our resurrection (Phil. iii : 21).

2. This will fully satisfy. Because
(a.) We shall be with Him. *(b.)* We shall be like Him.

III. THE THINGS INFERRED FROM THE TEXT.

1. Be not overcome with the disappointments of life.
2. It is high time to awake out of sleep.
3. Blessed are they who awake in soul before the final awakening.