

CHAPTER VIII.

ORNAMENTATION OF LANGUAGE.

Ornamentation is a law of nature, which adorns her works with foliage and flowers to make herself beautiful and fragrant. Among the races of mankind it is also a mark of advancement, refinement, and culture. The barbarian is content with his rude hut of mud, but the more races advance in civilization and education, the more they seek to make their houses beautiful with proper ornamentation. And this is true of their speech as well as of their dwellings. Nothing admits of ornamentation better than language, and it should be the aim and study of every public speaker to enrich his utterances from the boundless stores which are at his command.

It is here the work of the preacher will be that of the artist, and may be that of the painter or of the sculptor. Sometimes it is that of the painter, for there is such a thing as word-painting in public speech, and when well done is a great ornament to a sermon. At other times it is that of the sculptor whose art appears in his ability to cut off and remove with chisel and mallet whatever does not belong to the statue he is forming out of the block of stone. In the one case he puts something on, and in the other he takes something away; but both alike are done to give ornament and beauty to the work.

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If it be thought derogatory to the Gospel that its preachers should employ any ornament of speech in its proclamation, we need but remind you there is no book more full of sublime imagery or splendor of diction, than the Bible itself. Even our Lord, who spake as never man spake, employed similes and allegories in teaching His sublime truths, as is seen in His many parables and discourses. He closed his sermon on the Mount with the whistling of winds and the rushing of floods, and laid a tribute on all the phenomena of nature to give force and beauty to the doctrines He taught.

Young preachers, however, need to be cautioned against, rather than urged to the embellishment of their sermons with ornament, as the tendency, especially in this country, is to extravagance in this matter. The purpose of preaching is not to entertain, but to instruct, admonish, and persuade. Our preaching is to be "not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power." A house which is all ornament will not do to live in, and excess of rhetorical embellishment will spoil any sermon. Truth, like beauty, is most adorned when least adorned. Extravagant ornamentation characterises the house-maid rather than the mistress of the house. Mere rhetorical bombast, sometimes heard in the pulpit, is the cheap jewelry which marks the vulgar mind.

The following rules and suggestions therefore are given to caution against false or extravagant ornamentation, as well as to guide

in the use of that which will be helpful and proper.

Ornamentation is applied to language in three ways: in the elegance with which thought is expressed, in the figures of speech and illustrations employed, and in the use of the imagination.

a. **Elegance of expression.** This is gained in several ways.

(a.) **Avoid harsh words.** Certain words by their very sound, and others by their associations, seem to grate upon the ear. Dreadful words, like hell or damnation, are not to be made common by frequent use. The awful realities they signify are not to be kept back in our preaching, but other words or phrases can be used with better effect. There may be times when the hearts of preacher and hearers are stirred to their depth, when these words can be used with overwhelming effect, as our Lord used them in Matt. xxiii: 33, but such occasions are rare.

So of other words which are not dreadful, but simply harsh. These cannot always be avoided without obscuring our meaning, but where a choice can be made we should select such as contribute to an easy and graceful style; at the same time guarding against what would become pointless, insipid, and monotonous language.

(b.) Words in which the sound accords with and suggests the meaning, give elegance to language.

E.g., Thus we speak of the "pattering rain," the "twittering of swallows," the "hiss of steam," the "roar of the cataract," the "boom-

ing of cannon," etc. So in the expression "running rapidly," there is the sense of motion in the sound of its syllables. The familiar lines of Gray illustrate this rule:

" Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy **h**inklings lull the distant folds."

The words of the Psalmist—" He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters," have in them the fragrance of the meadow and the flowing of the brook.

(c.) The use of words beginning with the same letter, known as **alliteration**, may add elegance to a sentence. A notable instance of this is found in the 119th Psalm, in its Hebrew form. Where it is not strained nor overdone but appears natural and proper, it gives force as well as beauty to language. It is especially valuable in stating the chief heads of a sermon, as it not only makes a pleasing impression, but makes that impression more lasting.

Great care must be taken that the words be not far-fetched nor over-done, as in the case of the Old Puritans, who carried alliteration to ridiculous extremes in the titles and divisions of many of their sermons; *e. g.*, one addressed to "the chickens of the church, the sparrows of the Spirit, and the sweet swallows of salvation." This is ridiculous because incongruous : but to speak of „sin sowing the seeds of sorrow," gives elegance to words which teach a truth, and fit together. So a division of a sermon on Christ in which we consider His Person, His Purpose, and His Plan; or on

some doctrine or truth which we divide into its Lines, Limitations, and Lessons, gains attention and recollection by the alliteration employed. To be elegant, alliteration must be suitable, natural, and not occur too often.

(*d.*) Elegance may be gained also by cultivating that terseness of expression known as the epigram, and by the occasional use of antithesis.

An epigram is a short, pithy sentence cleverly stated so as to produce a mental surprise, by some unexpected coincidence or contrast. It often takes the form of a proverb, as when the Saviour says, "wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together."

Antithesis presents truth by way of contrasts, the two clauses of the expression illustrating each other. The books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes abound in these forms of speech and our Saviour employed antithesis with great power when He uttered the words "the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath." So also St. Paul, in II. Cor. xii : 14, "The children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children."

(*e.*) Variety of expression gives elegance to language.

This is secured either by the use of synonyms, so as to avoid the frequent use of the same word, especially in closing a sentence, or by varying the form of expression, *e.g.*, from a statement or proposition, to a question or simply by changing the order of words.

(*f.*) Unity gives elegance. Avoid being angular and disjointed in composition. Let the plan or skeleton run easily and not stiffly

through the sermon. Do not enumerate the subdivisions, nor distract the mind nor break the sermon into pieces by beginning each point with the word "again." Do not make the bones and joints of your skeleton too conspicuous. The plan or framework of the sermon is for the preacher, not the hearer. Let the flesh hide the skeleton and the vine cover the trellis. The same thing applies to proof-texts and other quotations. Chapter and verses should rarely be specified, unless there is special reason for it. If there be occasion to run on side-tracks, the switches should be passed as smoothly as possible.

(g.) **Simplicity of language** gives elegance to style. It is high praise when the hearers can say, "We understood every word of the sermon." Men whose minds are not clear, use polysyllabic and ambiguous words.

b. **Figures of speech.**

By figures of speech we mean the comparison of things spiritual with things natural, - the employing of metaphors, similes, allegories, etc., in composition. When properly employed, imagery not only enriches language, but aids in making the speaker's meaning plain and forcible. It gives interest and beauty to abstract truths and facts, and is the chief thing which distinguishes a fresh and pleasing style from that which is uninteresting and dry.

The Scriptures abound in figurative language, both in the Old Testament and in the New. Our Lord employed every sort of figure and illustration to make plain and impressive the truths He taught. Not only are all His **parables figures** of speech, but in nearly every

discourse He uses them freely. In speaking of His own person and work He exclaimed, "I am the good Shepherd;" "I am the light of the world,"-" I am the bread of life,"-" I am the door,"-" As the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall the coming of the Son of Man be," etc.

But as already intimated, the tendency is to excess in the use of figures of speech, and their excessive or injudicious use obscures rather than aids the mind in understanding the speaker's meaning, and instead of giving beauty and force, is a defect and blemish in style. It will be well to observe these rules:

(a.) Figures of speech must be appropriate to the subject. They must fit naturally, and not be dragged in where they do not belong.

(b.) Avoid mixing metaphors. The confusing of things which do not go together or belong to each other, not only defeats the use of metaphor by destroying its sense, but makes the speaker ridiculous. An eminent statesman certainly spoiled his speech when he appealed to the undiscovered lands, "on which the hand of man had never set *loot*."

(c.) Figures of speech should not be taken from what is vulgar or low. Their use is to elevate and not to lower the truth they illustrate. They should not raise in the mind any disagreeable or unclean thoughts or associations.

(d.) They should be used sparingly. The excessive use of figurative language weakens and detracts as much from speech as excessive ornament does from dress. Only where the

subject needs and is benefited by them should figures be used.

(e.) They should be kept in **their proper sphere**. Their place is in illustration, rather than in a statement of facts.

(f.) They should not be carried into **too minute detail**. It is a mistake to hunt after a great number of coincidences in unimportant points. They are apt to become merely curious, and sometimes ridiculous. Even if appropriate, too many details and resemblances reveal the preacher's ingenuity rather than illustrate his subject.

c. The use of illustrations.

The use of illustrations in sermons is so general and prominent a feature of preaching, especially in this country, as to require special notice, although what has been said about figures of speech will largely apply to this also.

1. Their value.

The meaning of the term, to make clear and vivid, to give light and lustre to a topic, shows their value. To compare things spiritual with things natural makes them more readily understood and increases our appreciation of them. They have always been used by the masters in oratory and those who have excelled in public speech, and were constantly employed by the sacred writers and by our Lord himself.

2. Their use.

In commending the use of illustrations we would not be understood as favoring that mode of preaching, which consists chiefly in story-telling. The sphere of illustration is to supplement instruction, not to supplant it.

Only after a truth has been clearly defined, argued, and proven will an apt illustration be in place and be appreciated. They therefore should be used sparingly, and never unless appropriate and really illustrating the topic or point to which they are applied. An incident or story, no matter how interesting in itself, will spoil rather than help a sermon into which it does not exactly and obviously fit.

3. **Their source.**

(a.) The many **books of religious anecdotes** or sermon-illustrations, offered for sale, are not to be commended. While some grains of wheat may be found in the abundance of chaff they contain, they have been used so often by others that they betray the fact they are of the "cut and dried" or sort. Illustrations should have a freshness about them, and the whole purpose and method of their use should be largely your own.

(b.) Much better is it to have **your own note-book of illustrations**. In your daily reading, whether in books of history, science, travel, fiction, or in the news of the day, many facts or incidents will occur which will serve admirably as illustrations in sermons. These should be noted either in full or by reference to where they may be found, for future use.

(c.) Familiarity with **Bible history and biography** will always furnish an abundant source of supply. To compare Scripture with Scripture, and illustrate Scripture truths by Scripture facts, is an element of strength in any sermon. No matter how familiar they are, they are always fresh and interesting, and come with special power because the illustration as

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well as the point illustrated come from the inspired Word of God.

(d.) Illustrations may be invented, *i.e.*, they may be supposed or imagined. While actual occurrences taken from history or the news of the day, are more striking, cases which are imagined may be useful in illustrating truth. This is seen in the fables of }Esop, Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, and pre-eminently in the parables of our Lord. When composing or inventing illustrations, the preacher should guard against making them consist of fictitious experiences, or making himself the prominent actor, hero, or victim.

(e.) **The** use of the imagination in composition is so constant as to require special care and cultivation. It is one of the greatest and most delightful of our mental powers. Its office is to clothe the otherwise dry fields of abstract truths or facts with life, verdure, and beauty. In art it creates what is fit and beautiful; in literature and oratory it finds the missing links, supplies what is lacking, uplifts the veil of the future, sets history before us in living characters, imparts warmth and color to all it touches, and often turns life's prose into pleasant poetry.

But imagination is apt to run riot unless carefully restrained, which is the more necessary with us because of the sacredness and responsibility of our office. We are not writers of fiction but must speak words of truth and soberness. We must never draw on our imagination for our facts. **It** may be employed in filling up unessential details in description, but even here care must be taken to make

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them consistent and probable. It must have no place in the exegetical or doctrinal parts of sermons, but must be confined to its proper sphere in narration, illustration, or description. Jewels may be worn as ornaments, but must not be served as articles of food.

The powers of imagination may be strengthened and cultivated in several ways:

(1.) By communing with **Nature**. His must be a dull mind which can gaze upon the wide expanse and ceaseless roll of the ocean; upon majestic forms of hills and mountains; or at night upon the countless stars shining over us, without finding and feeling his imagination stirred and aroused within him. Even the common scene of a dense forest, a pleasant landscape, or a golden sunset will awaken in every thoughtful mind sublime and sacred imagery, and whatever poetic talent it may possess.

(2.) The study of the best **works of man**, in art, architecture, and literature, will have a good effect on our powers of imagination. Familiarity with the writings of the best poets and writers of fiction will be of service, while the careful study of works of art in sculpture, painting, architecture, etc., will enlarge and elevate the sphere and strength of imagination.

(3.) The habit of **devout contemplation**, especially of God, the soul, of heaven and eternity, and similar objects and truths, will kindle not only our imagination but our enthusiasm, both of which are important factors in true eloquence.