

## CHAPTER X.

### THE CONCLUSION.

Its Importance—Design of the Conclusion—Material for Conclusion—Improper Material for Conclusion—General Character of the Conclusion—Suggestions on the Composition of the Conclusion.

#### § I. ITS IMPORTANCE.

The last and crowning part of a sermon is the conclusion.<sup>1</sup> "The culmination of the preacher's power may often be seen in these few closing paragraphs."<sup>2</sup> The highest skill of a preacher's oratory, the richest treasure of his scholarship, and the utmost force of his moral character, should here put forth their combined power in the outpouring of the grandest eloquence. The greatest care, then, should be taken in the composition of the conclusion, in order to make it the most telling part of the entire sermon.

Even in secular oratory, the utmost care is usually taken in the concluding passages that a sufficient reserve-force be preserved for the final onset upon the will of the hearer, and that the deepest impression may come last. The perorations of the orations of Cicero and Demosthenes were carefully constructed. The conclusion of Edmund Burke's speech on the impeachment of Warren Hastings

---

<sup>1</sup> In pulpit nomenclature, it has been known by various names. The early fathers called it "uses," but later it was designated by "application." Formerly, in Scotland, it was called "improvement;" the principal use of which was to improve, or to make better, the foregoing discourse. Some term it "reflection," "inferences," "remarks," "observations," etc.

<sup>2</sup> Phelps' *Theory of Preaching*, p. 455.

was elaborated sixteen times, and established his fame.<sup>1</sup> The conclusion of Lord Brougham's defense of Queen Caroline is said to have been rewritten eighteen or twenty times before it was delivered. The great political orator, John Bright, always spent much time in preparing his conclusions. So important seemed the conclusion in the estimation of all successful orators that "at this point in the process of the orator, they seem to have exerted their utmost possibility of effort, like a leaper, who throws his whole brute force into that one leap which is to save his life from destruction."<sup>2</sup>

If the conclusion is so important in secular and political oratory, it is still more so in the preaching of the gospel. Addresses before judicial tribunals are followed by immediate action affecting men's temporal weal or woe; but in religious addresses much greater interests are at stake, and much more depends on the final impression which the religious teacher makes upon the mind of his auditor. This is the decisive moment, the last effort which is to decide the victory. This effort ought to be a signal one, such a one as would cause the hearer to say, "Were I to live a hundred years I would never forget it." "The last five minutes of the sermon, in point of real effect, ought to be worth all the thirty or thirty-five that have gone before them." An English preacher used to say that he cared very little what he said the first half hour, but that he cared a very great deal what he said the last five minutes.<sup>3</sup>

We know of nothing in sermonizing which is more difficult, and which requires more skill and prudent consideration, than the construction of a good conclusion. Yet

<sup>1</sup> Hastings himself said, that in listening to it he felt himself to be the most guilty man alive.

<sup>2</sup> Shedd's *Homiletics and Pastoral Theology*, p. 197.

<sup>3</sup> Cicero's rule was, "*Quae excellent serventur ad perorandum*;"—Let the most excellent things be reserved for the peroration.

Etter, John W. *The Preacher and His Sermon*. Dayton, OH: United Brethren Publishing House, 1888.

how many preachers slight this part of the work. The introduction and discussion are carefully prepared and well delivered, but when they come to the conclusion they are fatigued, exhausted, and hurry to get done. They dispatch the latter part with some common-place exhortation, or remarks that are scattering and feeble. "The conclusion ought to have moved like a river, growing in volume and power, but instead of that, the discourse loses itself in some great marsh, or ends like the emptying of a pitcher, with a few poor drops and dregs."<sup>1</sup> It is folly for a preacher to offer in his conclusion the fruits of a jaded mind, or to exhaust himself or his audience before the decisive moment is reached. He who will be master of the situation and conqueror on the battle-field, must reserve his sublimest effort for the last.

Of the three fundamental parts of the sermon, introduction, discussion, and conclusion, the last is the most telling. If it is poor, it may destroy the impression of the first, and do much to neutralize the second; but if it is good, it will help to atone for the deficiencies of the first and second, or to heighten preceding excellences. The fault of indifference is nowhere so fatal as in the conclusion. The first two prepare the way for powerful impressions. They furnish the heat which, when concentrated into a focus, will burn; and he who neglects the opportunity of turning his material to good effect by focalizing it into a powerful conclusion, will make a failure of his sermon, however well prepared in its beginning and groundwork.

## § II. DESIGN OF THE CONCLUSION.

Secondarily, the design of the conclusion may be to avoid *abruptness* in closing a sermon,<sup>2</sup> which would be a

<sup>1</sup> Broadus' *Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, p. 278.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. James Wilson, of Philadelphia, used to preach exactly one hour by the clock; no more, no less. At the moment the hour hand pointed to twelve o'clock, he would stop and say, "Brethren, the hour is up; let us pray."