ARTICLE II.

CONCERNING THE MANNER OF PREACHING.

We wish, in an informal way, to consider a little the question. How shall a sermon be best presented to the people for whose benefit it is intended? Shall it be read in whole, read in part. or shall it be memorised, word for word, memorised as to portions only, or memorised not at all, *i.e.,* be purely extemporaneous? On the entire subject thus indicated, there has been a good deal of loose thinking and much inconsequent discussion. It is a theme which almost every one feels himself competent to treat; but with reference to which almost no one is entitled to oracular speech. The greatest minds have all differed, and all of them who had any modesty have confessed their inability to reach a perfectly satisfactory conclusion. We do not pretend that it is in our power to solve the problem, which has perplexed and baffled so many. It is one of those subjects, in fact, whose settlement will never be reached in a manner that shall meet the approbation of all who have a right to an opinion upon it; and for this reason, that it will always be true in the future, as it has been in the past, that this, that, or the other method of homiletic delivery must be chosen to suit this, that, or the other variety of homiletic talent. You can no more expect a hundred men to utter their thoughts in accordance with one uniform mode of delivery, than you can expect them to think alike in accordance with one invariable standard of logical or rhetorical excellence. In view of this remark, we might content ourselves with endeavoring to impress a single rule : let each preacher study his own peculiarities of mental structure and accommodate thereto his pulpit action, so that in the best manner which *he* can employ, without the least regard to the habits of others of his profession, he may set forth the truths of Scripture. We have known some men, who had accustomed themselves to writing and closely reading their sermons, but who, being evidently greatly hampered by this method, ought at once to have abandoned it for one that was freer. Others again we have known, who, igno-

rantly supposing themselves gifted for extemporaneous delivery, were as obviously unfitted for this method as they were for chiselling statues or manufacturing stars.

Is there not, however, some ideal standard of oratory which, arising out of the very nature of this most difficult art, presents that highest type of perfection towards which every gospel minister should aspire, and which, whatever be the peculiarities of talent, he should constantly strive to attain ? There undoubtedly is a transcendant point of excellence which now and then has been reached by a few, the attainment of which has made them renowned for all time—a renown that is shared by others in proportion to the degree of their approach towards these peerless masters. The point to which we refer—so far from the possibilities of ordinary minds as to be almost out of their sight—is where that orator stands, who seems to be endued with a species of inspiration, and who, in a style of speech at once the most natural and the most artistic, pours forth his illustrative and argumentative utterances in a flood of irresistible persuasion, almost as if he were some superhuman being, and who accordingly appears to move upon his object by the force of pure intuition.

The ideal standard of oratory, then, is undoubtedly displayed by the ideal man, who commands, to their full extent, the gifts of extempore speech, and who needs only an occasion in order to exhibit the highest order of eloquence. Whatever, in public address, most nearly, in the effect produced by the orator, conforms to this standard, must be thought most nearly to approach what every preacher should seek to reach. All this is so obvious, that it has become the commonest matter of course remark on the part of those who have expressed themselves on the subject, that none but an extemporaneous sermon ought ever to be tolerated ; that if it be written, or even carefully memorised, it does, to a vicious extent, impair its force, if not destroy its very nature, and that therefore he is not deserving the name of preacher, who is not accustomed to rely on the spur of each stimulating moment of delivery for his utterances of sacred truth. But such persons habitually, though often unwillingly, commit the mistake of supposing that nothing, or, if anything, but little, of the

power of oratory consists in the thought that is uttered; or, when they do allow weight to this prime element in oration, of supposing that thought can be extemporised as well as language, which is far from being the case. And although it cannot be denied that the persuasive force of a given discourse depends in very large measure upon the style of its delivery, yet neither can it be denied that the best model on which delivery can be formed is useless, unless the matter possess the substance of strong and vigorous thinking. So far is this true, that it sometimes has happened—in the cases of John Howe and Jonathan Edwards, for example—that the importance and the vitality of the thought have been sufficient to atone for the drawbacks that attended the most deformed and awkward style of labored utterance. A sermon, therefore, may be closely read, and yet be mighty in its effect upon the audience ; so mighty, indeed, as to render it difficult to believe that it could be mightier, even if delivered with all the appearance of an off-hand readiness.

Assuming, then, as the ground upon which all discussion with reference to the mode of oratorical speaking must proceed, that the speaker has something to say that is worth attention, and is appropriate to the occasion, the question narrows itself down to this : How best shall the preacher secure a requisite clothing of language for the proper setting forth of his previously prepared thoughts ?

In answer, we remark, first, that it is possible for all ministers to construct a wording for their sermons at the time of actual delivery - *i.e.,* unless they are utter idiots, they can find some language, good, bad, or indifferent, in which to express themselves. There is such a thing as pure extemporaneousness in so far as the mere phraseology is concerned ; and a certain degree of success in it is within every one's reach. Just as a man may privately converse, so may he publicly speak. If he have anything to say, he can say it more or less gracefully, unless he be seized with the paralysis of a helpless embarrassment. But yet there is, after all, a difference (sufficiently wide to justify a warning) between the mere conversationalist and the orator. The one has no sustained effort to make, and no culminating effect to produce;

moreover, he is helped to language by the suggestions that proceed from the words of his interlocutor. The other is compelled, in cold blood, as it were, to maintain a continuous and growing interest towards a foreseen important result; and his auditors, so far from aiding him, are rather a hindrance, because of a certain fear he has of disappointing them. Besides, the language of solemn discourse is required to be more elevated than would be expected in the ordinary interchanges of friendly colloquy, and because more elevated, more difficult of selection. It is not every one, therefore, who converses well, that can speak correspondingly well, when placed in circumstances where it is his office to instruct, convince, and persuade his fellow-men on subjects of great moment. Let no one, then, suppose that he is able to sermonise successfully on the spur of the moment, because he may admirably succeed in throwing interest into a drawing-room discussion, or a road-side talk. We know, indeed, that there are many who imagine that they have only to stand up in God's name, for the purpose of addressing a congregation, and relying upon some previous but vague preparation of a general order of thought, they will at once find themselves in a condition to give apposite and lively and brilliant utterance to what is in their minds, as if that day of inspiration had returned when it was needful to take no thought how or what one should speak. And many do thus stand up, expecting some wind of heaven to waft to their lips suitable words for the accomplishment of their design; but usually they wait thus in vain. That man's is certainly an exceptional case, who excels in this mode of preparation. No one, indeed, can safely rely upon it, whatever his ability in other respects, whatever the splendor or variety of his genius. He may sometimes be successful, but cannot be uniformly so. He may occasionally even go beyond himself, but much oftener will fall far behind what might be justly expected of him. Hence you will have observed that extemporaneous address of the character now indicated, when attempted by most of those presumptuous preachers who have tried it, is usually discursive, is generally commonplace, is often dull, is not seldom even contemptible! The wording is tame ; the periods are badly formed ; the gram-

mar, even, is faulty; the whole movement is languid : and the discourse, as a whole, deliquesces into an indescribable something that is wretchedly thin, watery, and tiresome; all this being certainly true of the discourses of men who are very far from being fools ; but yet, however good their thoughts, however glib their utterance, however taking their voice, are deficient in certain essential underlying qualities which they have never been able to acquire, because possessing no foundation for them in the native peculiarities of their mind or temperament. Nature must previously have done much for the preacher who hopes for even occasional excellence or for respectable proficiency in such off-hand address. He must have been gifted with a lively sensibility, (as Bautain puts it,) a penetrating intelligence, a prompt imagination, a decisive will and an instinct of speech, which urges him to speak as the instinct of song urges a bird to trill its notes. Any one, indeed, who has self-confidence, who has a wordy tongue, who has so little knowledge of his subject as to impose upon himself the delusion that he has a mastery over it—any one who thus superficially endowed, cares more to fill up the hour of discourse than to impress his audience with the importance of what he is saying, may without fear leave to the occasion to suggest what language he will employ : but still, how far short does such a one come of any just standard of oratory ! Mark his twisted sentences, note his broken imagery, observe his perplexed style throughout. Where is his reasoning cleanly cut by well-chosen phrases, his descriptions couched in vigorous idiom, his passion that flames into burning figure, its proper vehicle? Where is his impressiveness ? No, the mere power to multiply words, the utmost power to which the majority of this style of extemporisers attain, a power easily gained, is not the only nor the first essential of even passable oratory. To this the discriminating ability to select words is necessary to be added—to select them instantaneously—with which to clothe each successive train of thought, and then to transfuse them with the spirit, to heat them into the glow, to lift them into the light, which the narration, or the argument, or the exhortation severally demands.

Let no one dream, therefore, of this kind of slip-shod prepara-

tion, if preparation such unpreparedness can be called ; a preparation that is content with any words that may come, with any sentences that may arise ; with any poverty-stricken phrases which, threadbare and untidy, may present themselves. We may dismiss this species of extemporaneousness as entirely out of the question. Speaking strickly, it is an *impossible* kind. We know a minister who is accustomed to say that he needs only fifteen or twenty minutes to prepare as good a sermon as he desires to preach ; and truly, to hear his sermons, you would say that his desires were very moderate ! He has words—or words have him—and the abundance of their flow is surprising ; but whilst he says much, he impresses nothing ; every garment with which he attempts to clothe his ideas, is either too large or too small, and many of them are in tatters to an extent that does not conceal the nakedness of his matter ; and yet, this same preacher is a man of fine native ability, and had he been a student, might have achieved even greatness as a pulpit orator.

Taking it for granted, then, as surely we must, that no kind of sermonising can be recommended, even to men of first-rate mental powers, which is not preceded by the most careful preparation, (as to its language we now mean,) what shall be the next sort to come uner review ? If the preacher may not depend upon the hasty and careless product of that one particular instant of time in which he is proceeding to speak, what alternatives has he ? Is there no other kind of extemporaneous speaking to which he is at liberty to resort ? In the strict etymological sense of the word extemporaneous—no. By this we do not mean that all oral delivery is out of the question, in contradistinction from the written discourse. Did we mean this, we would be rebuked by the recollection that some of the most elaborate literary productions—some that have become classic, and will live through all time—have been thus spoken before being reduced to writing. Homer thus extemporised the "Iliad ;" being blind, he could not do otherwise. So, for the same reason, did Milton dictate to his daughter the "Paradise Lost." Walter Scott employed an amanuensis in the rapid preparation of some of his most exquisite works. So, Napoleon, in causing to be put on paper the

outlines of some of his most brilliant campaigns ; and long before his day, Cæsar. Wordsworth was accustomed to hum over to himself the verses of his poems, as one after another they arose in his mind, and then had recourse to some inmate of his house to fix them on the sheet. There is a species of extemporising which is quite compatible with perspicacity of insight into a great subject, with clearness, beauty, and energy of expression, and with the very highest power of word-painting. To this, accordingly, the studious preacher may safely resort. If there only be a mind well ordered and assiduously kept in order, abundantly stored with the materials of discourse, and above all, accustomed to the habit of *mental composition,* there need be no further difficulty ; the rest will all depend upon mere elocution. The men, however, who thus prepare their sermons, (and the history of the pulpit contains a number of illustrious names of this class,) are men who would scorn the idea that they preach without the most labored antecedent study. No one of their discourses can be said to be the immediate product of the very hours during which they are engaged in setting their thoughts in array before their own minds and giving them due form, each in its turn, in appropriate words ; but lying behind each separate performance, is the whole past of his life, with all that culture and all that acquisition of knowledge, which have served to make him what he now is; and so, every special discourse contains the result of years of previous discipline, the result of much closeted research and closet reflexion. One of those Oriental magicians, who amazes the spectator by causing a tree visibly to grow from the soil at his feet, gradually spreading out its branches, unfolding its blossoms, and ceasing its wondrous movement only when the limbs appear laden with fruit, does not perform this marvellous achievement by the sudden use of a skill which he that moment made his own: his magical tree is the offspring of an unbounded foregoing labor of contrivance. When Sir Joshua Reynolds was once remonstrated with by a person for whom he had painted an exquisite but small cabinet picture, on the ground that he was only five days in its execution : "Five days ! Why, sir, I have expended the work of thirty-five years upon it." That habit, accordingly of rapid

mental composition, which has characterised some of the masters of pulpit oratory, was the result of no mysterious inspiration, caught at the time of preparation, but of the studies, the toils, the practice of the greater part of a lifetime. Even, however, all that has thus gone before in the work of gathering the materials, of acquiring the art of arranging them, and of becoming familiar with the use of strong, graceful language, does not do away with the necessity for hard mental labor, when the time shall have arrived for condensing a portion of this collected matter into the sermon then demanded. The speaker still is compelled to choose, to cull, to collate, to cast into shape, to memorise. It is not needful, surely, to expand further the thought we have thus illustrated. The sum of the whole is this: No one can successfully preach who does not carefully study both the matter and the dress of his sermons. There is no royal road here. There is no escape from assiduous labor. There is no room for dependence even upon assured genius.

We have thus reached another point in the field of these suggestions, where that question meets us, how shall the beginner, supposing him to be a hard student (for no rules can serve the case of an indolent man,) how shall the conscientious *outstart* learn how to prepare for the solemn work to which the pulpit calls him ? It can be readily perceived upon what ground the experienced preacher, most of whose life has already been passed in the practice of sermonising, stands. Upon what ground does he stand, whose experience has all yet to come, from which he is to receive a push in the right direction ? 1st. He must be warned away from the purely impromptu method, the taking of a text *ad aperturam libri,* as the worst that is possible to be conceived. The utmost that this method can secure will be, mighty vociferation, extreme volubility, daubily-colored diction, unearthly pageantry of metaphor, and certain mortification and ultimate failure. In the second place, to repeat what was hinted at a little while since, he must accustom himself to mental composition, if he have or can, by any effort, acquire the habit of close and [concentrated attention; which with some is a rare gift, and with others is a possibility of pure acquirement. Every one can do

this to some extent; many can do this in a very considerable degree ; some few can do this to the very best and happiest effect. But, now, in the third place, let us say what is dictated by the universal experience of orators, granting that he has good matter to start with, that in no case can one readily learn to compose mentally, so as to give to his compositions good arrangement, so, as furthermore, to add to the arrangement a good filling in of words, to the words a good degree of correctness, to the correctness a good embellishment of ornamental dress, to the ornamental dress a good show of grace, and to the grace a good portion of energy, unless he *write.* Every one knows it is matter of painful observation, and can escape no observer, that most of the discourses which are uttered from the pulpit by men who are manifestly unaccustomed to the use of the pen, are not what they should be; that they are destitute, in large measure, of both those solid qualities—to say nothing of their other features—which congregations have the right to expect in their religious teachers. They are too often badly conceived, ramblingly put together, and obscurely worded; or else flat, stale, and unprofitable because abounding throughout in the merest commonplaces of theology. Mind you, we do not say that the only cure for this is to write your sermons and carry them into the *pulpit.* This habit of taking them into the pulpit is not now under consideration. All that we are at present aiming to impress, is that almost no man can become a good preacher at all, whether he use his manuscript at the time of delivery or not, unless he write a good deal. Moody may be an exception. Writing fixes thought by the very mechanism employed, for it is strangely true that the mere presence of a sheet of paper, the mere handling of the pen, with its nib directed to the inviting blank, exerts an influence truly great, in enabling one to gather to a focus his scattered ideas. Who has not felt the force of this inscrutable agency, and been astonished at the facility he has had in inking ideas which was denied him in thinking them out whilst pacing his room, or, may be, walking through the solitary woods. But, over and above this, you actually see the process of evolving thought when you are engaged in writing. You observe how the first sentence

gives impulse to the composition of the second, how the subtle suggestions of these prepare you for the third, and so on: whilst this very observation interests your inind, serves to warm it, and you go on kindling as you proceed. Besides, when you write you are not constrained to exert memory in an effort to retain, what has gone before. The last spur is all that the mind needs to enable it to retain the impulse of what has immediately preceded the point the writer is now laboring on,—a point which is, indeed, the concentrated summing up of the whole that has been previously written; or, if you shall lose the promptings of this essential spur at any step of your progress, there is your manuscript, and you can go over it all, gather it again to a head, and by bringing it to bear upon the spot where you have stuck, impart the blow of a further increment to the growing discourse. Nor is this all. You can cautiously choose your words as you proceed, carefully select the order of their marshalling, ponder the force of the qualifying terms, shade the coloring of your illustrations, disentangle confusing figures of speech, and by a hundred little devices cause every succeeding portion to take in its share of the unity and consistency, that will issue in a harmonious whole.

One will thus at once put himself in the way of acquiring the art of thinking and of expressing thought with neatness and vigor, so that by and by he may reach that rewarding moment of time, when he will no longer need the paper or the pen, but can, by the slowly acquired dexterity which has been imparted to the intellect, write what he wishes to speak, upon his memory by just setting the machinery he has patiently mastered to work on a given mass of sermonising material. It is by such a process, long and diligently continued, that many a man has been empowered with the ability to think as promptly and as compactly when walking the street or treading the paths of his garden, as when in his study; and to dress his thoughts as becomingly as when his pen was tracing characters upon the paper. Thoroughly discipline the mind, in other words; and he who does this will make it his glad and willing servant at all times, whenever bodily health will allow its free and vigorous

use. It requires time, it requires exertion, it requires perseverance, it requires the acquisition of self-poise, to enable any man to speak eloquently in public once; how much more to speak to the same public, several times every week, for years together. And it is to this that the preacher is to look—preparation for homiletic exercises. And the best preparation for ensuring uniform success is *much writing;* in connection with that, much study, which will always be giving him something both important and fresh to write about. The standard, then, ought to be discourse that is methodical as to plan, connected as to thought, orderly as to internal arrangement, close as to the maintenance of unity, and finished as to rhetorical style. By whatever process a speaker may be able to reach this standard, he ought to reach it; but he will surely find that the daily use of the pen is at once the most direct and philosophical way for approaching it.

Our readers will have observed that in all these remarks, not yet has been touched that other question, which some may deem, after all, the most important. Shall the preacher learn to preach without having his manuscript before him in the pulpit? We are prepared to aver that this is a question of importance, rather in appearance than in reality. No one can presume to establish a *law* at this point. Some men can learn to preach best by previous meditation only, having acquired, and still daily acquiring, accuracy of thought and energy of expression by a diligent employment of the pen. Others can preach best by writing out their sermons in full and committing them to memory. Others again can preach best by memorising portions of each discourse, and leaving the other portions to be filled out amid the accumulating heats of actual delivery. Others still can preach best by having before them a carefully prepared outline, where all the thoughts are presented to the eye in their due order, but depending upon the occasion for the very words which shall be made the immediate vehicle of communication. Others there are who feel that they must depend upon the presence of the entire sermon lying on the desk before them. Which of these methods, or what varieties of them, any man shall see fit to

adopt must be left to his own intelligent choice—a choice that is to be regulated by his own idiosyncrasies of mind.

What, then, is that one essential of good preaching which ought to distinguish the pulpit exercises of the man (whatever mode he may adopt for the supreme moment,) when saving truth is to be uttered to a waiting congregation? We hesitate not to say that that essential thing does *not* attach to the circumstance of the mode of preparation. It lies far apart from all this. It lies in the acquisition of the ability to preach *to* the people not *at* them. And if it be asked what is meant by such a statement, we would reply that it means simply this: the preacher and his sermon should, for the time being, be identical—it should be *a part of himself ;* so that he can say, not, I *have* my sermon, but, I *am* my sermon. The great, the potential, the essential thing is this: *be absorbed in your subject,* so that when it comes flowing from the lips it will stream therefrom like living waters, and will rush upon the audience in a manner bold, fearless, and go directly to the mark, from the understanding to the understanding, from the heart to the heart, from a soul on fire to souls gradually kindled into sympathetic heat. Earnestness is the thing; the earnestness that is awakened by the consideration that the good man has something to say, which is deserving of a hearing not only, but *that must be heard,* as you and the people shall answer for the result in the dread day of final judgment. Cold preaching is none. Doctrine, as a corpse, is not only itself dead, but leadening. Truth vitalised is truth triumphant. And tell us, does this kind of preaching depend upon off-hand delivery more than upon written discoursing? Yes, if you are able to throw impressive warmth into your manner only by that kind of delivery; but no, if you can do it equally well by the alternative method, or by some mixture of the two. We know that there are some who cannot preach with vigor, with enthusiasm, with contagious sympathy, unless they are unhampered by manuscript. Let, then, such men never use the manuscript; let them not *dare* to use it, for they will only be throwing away their time and scandalising their opportunities. If, however, any others are enabled to hit upon that very way, which shall be, in their

cases, most promotive of the true end of preaching—*i.e.,* convincing men of the truth, and persuading them to act in accordance with its demands—whether that way be this, that, or the other,—such is the way for them. We would not, therefore, tie any preacher to rules of universal applicability. There are no such rules. He must just preach in the most efficient way that grace and nature—and grace and nature cultivated—shall point out as his special path to success in the great work. If he be a *live* man, if he have the weight of souls upon his conscience, if he have the glory of the God who has commissioned him, enthroned as a constraining, royally commanding motive in his breast, he will *preach,* will preach well, will preach to the upbuilding of Christ's kingdom, will preach as one who shall *need never to be ashamed.* Essays, indeed, have no place in the pulpit; close, dull, perfunctory reading has no place there. It is the place for the preacher whose lips have on them the word of salvation; and, if he write, or if he write not, he will, nevertheless, so deliver his prepared thoughts as if he means what he says, and as if he is saying only what he means. He will be showing, not himself, but Christ; he will be displaying, not his own talents, but the precious gospel; he will be intent on winning, not the poor tribute of human applause, but the rich reward of his Master's approbation; he will be lost in his theme, and feel after he has closed his sermon, not that he has done discredit to his own reputation, but that he may, after all, have proved but a poor steward of the mysteries of the grace of God. Binney, when asked what he thought the best method of preaching, replied, "Gather your materials with all care, and set fire to them in the pulpit."

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