THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

RHETORICAL ELEMENTS IN THE SERMON

SUMMARY

The sermon a work of art. As a composition, should have in it; Statement, Argument, Illustration. Before dealing with these we consider the Literary and Oratorical qualities in the sermon.

THE LITERARY QUALITY IN THE SERMON

1. Estimate at its true value the literary form of the discourse:

(1) Thus the preacher's message reaches the congregation;
(2) Literary superiority attracts and holds hearers;
(3) The style cannot be separated from the thought;
(4) There is a moral element in style;
(5) Advantages of having to speak in English.

2. Write carefully:

(1) Take time;
(2) Habitually write your best.

3. Write constantly.
4. Aim at freshness and finish:

(1) At freshness:

(a) Use the language of daily life;
(b) Acquire a rich and varied style;
(c) Study the style of other preachers;
(d) Note your own style carefully;

(2) At finish:

(a) Take time in selecting the right word;
(b) But do not elaborate over much.

NOTE. As to quotations.

II. THE ORATORICAL QUALITY IN THE SERMON

1. The advantages of the quality.
2. How it comes:

(1) It is the result of possessing the oratorical instinct;
(2) But can be strengthened.

3. How it shows itself:

(1) In the choice of words;
(2) In the arrangement of sentences;
(3) In the impression made by the whole sermon:

(a) Keep it true in its proportion;
(b) Expand when expansion is needed;
(c) Let the principal thought remain prominent.

Literary and Oratorical

As much as a building or a picture the sermon may be regarded as a work of art. It is put together according to a definite plan, and with a distinct purpose. Therefore we speak of it as a composition, for whether in art or literature "by composition is meant the distribution and orderly placing of things, both in general and particular" (Dryden).

Ruskin's broad statement holds in the making of the sermon as well as in the making of the picture: "Composition may be best defined as the help of everything in the picture by everything else" ("*Modern Painters*" Vol. V, p. 165).

So that when we speak of the sermon as a composition we have in mind the several parts of which it is made up, so harmoniously arranged and subordinated to the whole as to produce the true effect. As a composition the sermon should have in it an element of statement, which may be largely exegetical, an element of argument, and an element of illustration.

Proving, painting, and persuading were "the three p's" in Thomas Guthrie's homiletics. The successful employment of these elements will depend in part on the preacher's sermon style, on its general quality as suitable to literary composition, and on its special quality as suitable to a composition intended to be spoken.

In this chapter we propose to deal with this subject and consider the literary and oratorical elements in the sermon.

1. The literary quality in the sermon needs to be considered first.

Dean Swift in his sarcastic description of the shallow freethinkers of his day sneers at “that quality of their voluminous writings which the poverty of the English language compels me to call their style.” It would be well had the Dean’s gibe applied to freethinkers only. But it does not.

1. As our first point, therefore, we would counsel the preacher to estimate at its true value the literary form of his discourse.

(1) It is important because it is the form in which the preacher’s message gets to his congregation.

(2) Beyond question literary superiority attracts and holds hearers. Unconsciously to themselves audiences are critical of language. A congregation of peasants in a country chapel in England sat in judgment upon a certain preacher because “he used half-crown words when sixpenny ones would have served” (Memoir of Dr. R. W. McAll,” p. 146).

(3) Moreover, we can no more consider the style of the sermon apart from its thought, than we can consider the pith of the tree apart from its wood.

Style is closely connected with thought. To write well is, as Renan says, to think well. There is no art of style distinct from the culture of the mind. Good training of the mind is the only school of good style; wanting that, you have merely rhetoric and bad taste. We have not yet outgrown Blair’s maxim, “Embarrassed, obscure, and feeble sentiments are generally if not always the result of embarrassed, obscure, and feeble thought.”

(4) May we not even go further than this, and assert that to a certain extent the style of the sermon is a reflection of the character of the preacher?

“Look in thy heart, and write,” said Sir Philip Sydney.

Gibbon held that “the style of the author should be the image of his mind”; and Emerson touched the same truth when he gave it as his opinion that “style is the revelation of the inner self.”

(5) It is inspiring for us to reflect that the preacher who uses English as his speech possesses a very noble medium of communication.

More and more as the years pass, for us to be beholden to the great metropolitan English speech will be to launch out upon “the sea which receives tributaries from every region under Heaven” (Emerson, “*Society and Solitude*”).

Perhaps it is necessary also to remind the young preacher that with an increase of culture our hearers become more exacting in this matter of the use of good English by their ministers. Neither in nor out of the pulpit should language either slipshod or slang be tolerated. The preacher should in this, as in other and higher matters, be an example to the flock.

“Everybody writes so well now,” Tennyson once said half-complainingly; and the day is coming, let us hope, when everybody will speak so well as to demand from the ministry “**sound speech that cannot be condemned**.”

We counsel the preacher to read constantly in the writings of the best masters of pure, sinewy, and melodious English. The works of De Quincey, Macaulay, Emerson, Matthew Arnold, Cardinal Newman, J. A. Froude, and John Ruskin, will furnish good models, and the most varied taste should find pleasure as well as profit in the masterpieces of one or more of these great writers.

2. As a second point, we urge on the preacher to write carefully.

Let it be granted at once that continuous sermon writing is not easy. George William Curtis said that seeing it took him three months to prepare a lecture, how a clergyman could prepare two sermons a week fit to deliver before an audience, he could not understand; John Bright was wont to say the same thing.

Undoubtedly the labor of conscientious literary work in any department is more severe than those who are strangers to it suppose.

“A distress,” says John Henry Newman, “sometimes so keen and so specific that it resembles nothing else than bodily pain, is the token of the wear and tear of the mind.”

The fact that the preacher deals so largely with the emotions adds to this burden in composition.

Such considerations as these must be kept in mind in order to make us faithful in our pulpit preparation.

(1) By all means take time over your sermons.

“It is an awful thing to write against Time, and Time always is even with us in the end, and he never lets what is written against him last very long or go very far (J. R. Lowell).

Begin to prepare your sermon early in the week.

Thomas Spencer, a young English preacher of rare promise, was accidentally drowned on Monday morning, but the outline of the sermons for the next Sunday was found in his pocket.

“To secure thought and preparation,” counsels Bishop Wilberforce, “begin, whenever it is possible, the next Sunday’s sermon at least on the preceding Monday. Do not listen to the pleading of indolence or let the bidding of a fastidious spirit wait for the afflatus which is held by many to constitute the whole peculiarity of genius.”

To his students Dr. Chalmers said: “I would have you all sit down doggedly; for if you once bethink yourselves of waiting for the afflatus, the risk is that the afflatus never may come” (Hanna, “*Life of Chalmers*,” Vol. II, Chap. I).

(2) And we may add as another counsel: Accustom yourself to write your best on all occasions.

Charles Lamb, the essayist, used to say that his most careful writings were in the ledgers of the East India Company whose clerk for all his active life he was, and Anthony Trollope, the novelist, who was employed in the General Post Office, London, speaks of the infinite pains which he took with the reports that he prepared for his employers.

These are illustrations of the wise words of a conscientious American writer: “He who does not write as well as he can on every occasion, will soon form the habit of not writing well at all” (George Ripley).

3. Our third point naturally follows: Write constantly.

Without insisting upon any hard and fast rule which should be binding on all preachers, it is certainly fair to say that he who cannot write in full one sermon every week has mistaken his vocation. If your method is to preach without manuscript, all the more necessary is it that you write” (W. M. Taylor, “*Scottish Pulpit*,” p. 183).

The habit of writing as a means of mental culture was one characteristic of Jonathan Edwards as a preacher which he retained through life (Allen’s “*Life of Edwards*,” p. 4).

Robert Hall lays down as “a rule admitting of no exception, that a man will speak well in proportion as he has written much.”

His own practice would suggest that we substitute for the word “written,” the word “composed.” It may be possible to train ourselves as he did, to put long trains of thought into words without writing a line. But this is not common, nor is it a practice to be desired. The secret of good talking is to talk with the pen.

4. Finally, aim at freshness and finish in your composition.

(1) At freshness.

To this end use the language of daily life. “Our preaching is much addicted to a few words; it holds on to phrases when lapse of time has changed their meaning” (Emerson).

Avoid this by cultivating a more copious vocabulary.

Preaching is conversation raised to its highest power. Those who heard Mr. Spurgeon heard the finest illustration of his own opinion that “the perfection of preaching is to talk.”

When Thomas Guthrie found this out he abandoned the traditional pulpit phraseology, spoke as he would on a platform or in a parlor, and compelled the reluctant English critic to declare that he was the foremost preacher of his generation” (The London “*Times*,” newspaper).

One of the most original of preachers, Robertson, of Irvine, changed his style on the advice of a lady of his congregation, who told him that his manner of speaking in the pulpit savored too much of the schools. “In conversation you are most natural and powerful. Bring your conversational manner of thinking and speaking into the pulpit. Adopt it there, and your discourse will be most effective.”

Endeavor to acquire a style which will be rich and varied.

Terence resolved to make it a principal rule of life not to be too much addicted to one thing, and in our composition the same rule is useful. Cultivate what Sydney Smith terms “multifariousness of style.”

Avoid those conventional platitudes which lie in wait for every preacher, and are sure to betray him who does not carefully weigh his words. Demolish a commonplace with a happily chosen phrase (A. S. Hill, “*Our English*,” pp. 154, 155).

Not a word suitable to your thought, but the word is what you are after. The sermons of other preachers may with profit be studied in this matter of style, and especially the sermons of the preachers of the present time. The day for what were formerly called “great sermons” is not now.

“We don’t preach now-a-days,” said Phillips Brooks, “as they used to do when a man was known by some great sermon, like Robert Hall’s on ‘*Modern Infidelity*.” Our style is bound to adjust itself to the age.

Note carefully your own style as you adventure with it on the sea of experience. It is like a boat which you must learn to know and to handle.

“This word,” you say to yourself as you look back when the sermon has been delivered, “told.” Ask yourself why it told. “That word failed. Why?” Endeavor to have a style of your own. Think your thoughts clear through, clothing them in the words which fit them the best. This will give you what is called “distinction” of style. Your words will now be not yours so much as you” (“*John Foster’s Life*,” p. 117).

(2) Aim at finish.

Beginning your work of preparation early in the week, you will be able to take time in selecting the right word.

One popular novelist of the present day will wait an hour if necessary for his word. Shelley sooner than use an inferior word left a blank in his lines when the right word did not occur to him.

To express accurately the shimmer of the long grass or the shade of green under the breaking wave another poet would pause and watch and think for weeks together. Although we shall not be able to do this, yet it is well for us to lay to heart what John Morley says:

“It is not everybody who can command the mighty rhythm of the greatest master of human speech. But everyone can make reasonably sure that he knows what he means, and whether he has found the right word.”

Cardinal Newman, treating of this subject, says: “My one and single desire has been to do what is so difficult, namely, to express clearly and exactly my meaning.” No man in the Victorian era better succeeded in doing this than did Newman. And yet there may be some preachers who need to be cautioned against elaborating over much.

The exigencies of the pulpit make this failing rare. The “Give, Give,” which sounds in our ear its demand for the two sermons every week, hushes the whisperings of a fastidious taste.

It may be some consolation to us who would readily bestow more time on polishing our sermon if only the time were to be had, to reflect that after all constant and careful writing is sure to give to our style all the finish that is necessary.

An extreme fastidiousness often caused Dr. F. J. A. Hort to sit hour after hour in the spell of a sort of aphasia which robbed him for the time of all power of expression. But assuredly “a sermon, like a tool, may be polished till it has no edge” (Job Orton).

The preacher’s style may become featureless through excess of finish; and with Andrea del Sarto we may sigh:

All is silver gray,
Placid and perfect with my art; the worse!

Better listen to Spurgeon’s homely warning to his students against sermons which are prepared till there is no living zeal possible in connection with them, “Brethren, you will never grow anything out of boiled potatoes.”

Conscious that his own style was in danger of becoming too measured, he was in the habit of reading Carlyle in order to gain rugged and abrupt forms of speech.

At this point it may be well to put into a few sentences what needs to be said as to the habit of quoting from others. Do not then, be afraid to quote when to do so is effective. “He that never quotes will never be quoted” (Spurgeon).

Never quote in any other language than the vernacular. Beware of quoting overmuch, and so reducing your sermon to a mosaic, brilliant only with stones from various and strange mines. There are preachers who recall the inelegant criticism which Byron passed on Hazlitt that “his style suffered from a cutaneous eruption.”

Trite and commonplace quotations should certainly be avoided. In making prose quotations it seems not to be necessary to acknowledge your indebtedness to another when the words are familiar; and where you do refer to the author it is wise to do it in the briefest manner. Attention must not be diverted from the main subject of the discourse.

If you are not gifted with a good verbal memory it may be best to clothe the thought in your own words, and in this case a general acknowledgment of indebtedness will suffice.

As to quotations from poetry, the fewer the better. Beware of hackneyed lines and couplets from the hymn book. To conclude a sermon with poetry is open to the objection that it gives to the discourse an air of self-consciousness and artfulness. Occasionally it may be done with great effect, but the practice of rounding off a discourse with a line of poetry is to be deprecated.

Prose is after all the natural language for earnest address; and the sermon should be never so much a sermon as in its closing words.

I need scarcely say that in making poetical quotations it is not necessary to acknowledge that you are indebted for them to another. If the poetry is poor it should not be quoted at all. If it is good you can trust the congregation not to credit you with a gift which you do not possess.

II. We proceed to speak in the next place of the oratorical quality in the sermon

1. We inquire first, what are the advantages of this quality?

I answer, it is this gift of oratory by which in a very large measure the preacher commands the emotion of his hearers.

"The object of the speaker," it has been said, and the distinction is a true one, "is to give information: the object of the orator is to incite to action.

- The speaker illumines the understanding; the orator impels and directs the passions.
- The speaker is a guide; the orator is a master.

Speech is light; the oration is force" (George Jacob Holyoake).

Times in the history of preaching when it has been the fashion to sneer at this great power have been times of pulpit decay.

"We have no sermons that are addressed to the passions that are good for anything," complained Dr. Johnson in the dreary years of the last century. For this reason he hesitated to say what sermons afforded the best specimens of pulpit eloquence.

In accounting for the remarkable power of Mr. Spurgeon it has perhaps not been sufficiently considered that his sermons; while not critical or in any great extent exegetical, are all evolved from the heart. They come from the emotions and go to the emotions. Truth was scarcely truth to him until it had been through the fires of his own experience.

"The heart," as Augustine said, "makes the theologian."

2. We ask, again, how does this quality come?

(1) In the first instance, no doubt, the oratorical quality in the sermon is the result of the oratorical instinct in the preacher.

Eloquence, unlike rhetoric, is inborn, and he who has it not as a native possession will never be able to acquire it.

John Foster was gifted with the highest literary skill, but he was entirely wanting in oratorical power. We read his essays with all the delight which is kindled by a delicate and critical choice of language, and a felicity of diction perhaps unsurpassed in English writers; but listen to him when he speaks, and you agree with Robert Hall:

“Though his words might be fire within, the moment they left his lips they froze and fell down at his feet.”

The sermon which sounds well when read is not always, nor indeed often, the sermon which does the most execution when it is spoken.

“Does it read well?” Charles James Fox inquired about a speech which had been delivered in the British House of Commons.

“Yes, grandly.”

“Then it was not a good speech.”

(2) And yet he who possesses in any degree this gift of natural oratory can strengthen and improve it by cultivation and practice.

He who is accustomed to speak frequently learns in time how best to make his points, and how to arrange and discharge his material. Especially does this skill show itself when he is making the transition from one division of his sermon to another. The most difficult art to one who is beginning to speak in public, becomes at length so easy and natural to him that it is with a sense of triumph that he approaches the point where his transition occurs. He sees the bridge by which the gulf can be crossed, and he treads it with conscious mastery.

3. How then, it may be asked, does the oratorical quality in a sermon show itself?

(1) In the choice of words.

Those which are used will be resonant in utterance. They will carry farthest, and make the readiest and strongest impression on the hearer. They will be nervous and yet unaffected, and above all they will be the words best suited to his purpose.

“Understanding language and the positive degree,” so runs Emerson’s comment on the oratory of Daniel Webster, “all his words tell. What is small he shows as simple, and makes the great great.”

Words which are chiefly remarkable for their length, words which do not readily reveal their meaning, words which are superfine or affected are to be rejected.

"Particularly," says Dr. Joseph Parker, "strike out all such words as 'methinks I see,' 'cherubim and seraphim,' 'the glinting stars,' 'the stellar heavens,' 'the circumambient air,' 'the rustling wings,' 'the pearly gates,' 'the glistening dew,' 'the meandering rills,' and 'the crystal battlements of Heaven.' I know how pretty they look to the young eye, and how sweetly they sound in the young ear; but let them go without a sigh."

This is not to condemn vivid and dramatic words. By all means train yourself in the use of them. When not exaggerated, they are most effective. The selfishness of the unprincipled labor agitator was exposed at a touch when Henry Ward Beecher declared that "for himself he had no sympathy for an eight-hour man with a fourteen-hour wife."

Our own petitions rose in condemnation of our practice when he also said that many of us "prayed cream and lived skim-milk."

(2) This oratorical quality in the discourse shows itself in the arrangement of the sentences, and of the various parts of the sermon. The climax is the result of three things: of thought, which in the sermon grows from more to more; of rhetoric which helps the sermon to rise to loftier heights of expression at the points where it can produce the best effect; of delivery, which swells in form and intensifies in fervor as each coign of vantage in argument and appeal is gained (A. S. Hill, "*Principles of Rhetoric*," p. 192).

(3) The oratorical quality can be traced in the impression which the whole sermon makes on the minds of the hearers.

In each part of the sermon let the proper proportion be observed. Do not be so prolix in the earlier stages that you leave yourself no time to complete the discourse symmetrically. Many a sermon lacks the topstone because so much time has been spent on the foundations. In architecture, the base of the column is designedly made plain, because the capital which is its crowning glory is richly carved. Expand in your composition when expansion seems to be needed.

A leading lawyer gave it as his opinion in talking upon this subject with C. G. Finney, that preachers are needlessly afraid of repetition. Words, phrases, even whole sentences may be repeated when to do so makes the meaning plainer, and the sermon more effective.
The repetition of embarrassed exhaustion is one thing, the repetition of rhetorical enforcement is quite another. What our congregations resent is not the second of these.

"Bulk," as Whately pithily says, "is necessary to digestion. Most men are like horses, they need straw to their oats."

What has been said as to the writer is even more true as to the speaker: "An author who finds himself obliged to choose between repetition and obscurity, ought not to doubt as to his choice."

Of one of her characters George Eliot observes, “It was a defensive measure of Sir Hugo Mallinger’s to mingle purposeless remarks with the expression of serious feeling.”

No doubt there has been far too much of this done in the pulpit. In urging that in common with other speakers the preacher cultivate the art of expanding his thought in words, I shall not be understood to plead for the platitudes for which the pulpit has been not without reason condemned.

Very different is the repetition and expansion of the true orator. Listen to Lacordaire as he dwells on our Lord’s Commission to his apostles, and see how one simple sentence can be clothed with splendor: “Go teach all nations. Fear neither the difficulties of foreign tongues, nor the differences of manners, nor the power of secular governments. Consult not the course of rivers nor the direction of mountain ranges; go straight on. Go as the thunder of him who sent you, as the creative word went, which carried life into chaos, as the eagles go, and the angels.”

This is rhetoric indeed, the rhetoric of a spoken style, but it is rhetoric directed only to the apprehension and enforcement of the very truth which found its simplest expression in the few pregnant words, “**Go teach all nations**.”

So, as our final counsel here, we say, See to it that when the sermon is completed the principal thought stands out clearly before the mind of your hearer.

Lyman Beecher was wont to assert that a sermon should have one, and but one, “burning point.” The power of Chalmers lay here. He held that one point up to his congregation, as a lapidary holds up the diamond, until every facet of it caught the light.

That our hearers should be able to travel all the lines of statement, argument, and illustration by which the burning point has been reached is not necessary. Enough if the impression remain. The truth embodied in the theme is the truth finally impressed on the mind, enshrined in the heart, enthroned in the conscience.

~ end of chapter 13 ~

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