

THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE DELIVERY OF THE SERMON (CONTINUED)

SUMMARY

DEFINITION. Full and careful preparation, combined with free delivery.

FULL AND CAREFUL PREPARATION

1. The rhetorical order:

- (1) The conception of ideas;
- (2) Their arrangement in logical order;
- (3) Their expression in fitting language.

2. Advantages of writing:

- (1) It gives exactness of expression;
- (2) It gives literary finish;
- (3) Rhetorical efficiency:
 - (a) Writing will impress the language on the mind;
 - (b) And will give the preacher a working vocabulary.

NOTE

- (a) As to the time required for writing a sermon;
- (b) Points in contrast with other methods.

II. FREE DELIVERY

Essentials to success:

1. A resolve to succeed.
2. Attention to health.
3. Regular habits of work.
4. Rhetorical preparation.

5. Pulpit experience.

This will bring

- (1) Ease;
- (2) A sense of reality;
- (3) Freedom and vividness;
- (4) Accuracy.

NOTE

As to points which fail to occur in delivery. Conclusion.

This method commended:

1. Because it avoids the objections urged against other methods.
2. Because it combines the largest number of excellencies.
3. Because it furnishes a store of useful material.
4. Because it insures a tolerable level of excellence.
5. Because it does most complete justice to the work of preaching.

The Composite Method

To each one of the methods of delivering a sermon already considered there are, as we have seen, grave objections. Let it be remembered that we are in search of the best way for the largest number of preachers.

That Chalmers read, and Guthrie recited, and Spurgeon extemporized, can furnish no model for the majority of us to copy. The method which we are now to consider may be commended because it is not only on the whole the most satisfactory, but also because any preacher may acquire it who is willing to take pains to do so. He who is not willing to take pains should have no place in the ministry.

The composite method we define as full and careful preparation combined with free delivery.

Here, it will be noticed, there are two statements:

The method demands full and careful preparation, and it also demands free delivery. With these two points we will now deal more at length.

I. Full and careful preparation is the first requisite in the composite method of delivery

In any discourse the true rhetorical order is, first, the: conception of ideas; then, their orderly arrangement; and finally, their expression in fitting language. Now in the preparation of a sermon to be given according to the method which we have under consideration at present, we must strenuously insist on each of these three.

1. As to the conception of ideas, let us say, By all means do justice to your high vocation.

The preacher has the noblest of all subjects - religion; he has the best of handbooks - the Bible; he has at his service vast accumulations of opinion and research in commentaries and encyclopedias; and, better even than all of these, he has the distinct promise of Divine aid. Even with so many points in his favor, however, he is bound to bear in mind continually the fact that the conception of ideas must imply his own personal apprehension of them.

“It is far better,” as Martin Luther says, “to see with our own eyes than with other people’s eyes”; and there are preachers, waterlogged on the Dead Sea of human authority, who need to lay to heart his further words: “Through so many commentaries and books the dear Bible is buried, so that the people do not look at the text itself.”

We repeat, that at the root of the composite method lies the imperative necessity that you make your own any ideas which you propose to use. Socrates was wont to declare that all men are eloquent enough on subjects whereon they have knowledge; and Quintilian puts the prime importance of mastering our material in his counsel, “Let there be care about words. but solicitude about things.”

To a speaker who had not yet learned this first lesson in effective oratory, Pitt said: “You are more anxious about words than about ideas. You do not consider that if you are thinking of words you will have no ideas, but if you have ideas words will come of themselves.” So Horace Bushnell gave it as his deliberate judgment, “that there cannot be much preaching worthy of the name where there is no thinking.”

2. The ideas thus acquired must, in the next place, be arranged in logical order.

Bring them into such relations the one to the other that they shall form a continuous chain. The divisions of the discourse, and the thoughts under them, should stand in their true relations. Test this by repeating to yourself the successive stages in your discourse before you have begun to compose. “Upon the truthfulness of the arrangement,” says F. W. Robertson, “all depends.”

Now proceed to write out carefully a sermon plan embodying this line of thought. The fullness or slightness of this plan is very much a matter of personal choice, but we recommend that it be so complete that if necessary it can be carried into the pulpit and preached from without writing out the sermon.

Notice at this point, that already the composite method differs from memorizing. Special prominence is given not to the expression of the ideas but to their conception and arrangement. Instead of concerning himself chiefly with the language of the sermon which he has to commit to memory, the preacher is most emphatically interested with its thought. “Think of your ideas,” was Pitt’s advice to a friend, “and let your words take care of themselves.”

3. Now the preacher may pass to the expression of his ideas.

The sermon may be written out in full. No doubt this practice of writing out the sermon word for word means hard and often distasteful work.

“At first,” says President Wayland, reviewing his early experiences, “it was intolerable labor.”

A joy and rapture to talk out his thought in words that flashed upon the mind at the instant, Spurgeon declared that to him “writing was the work of a slave.” Yet by persevering at it, the one settled down to the conviction that the distasteful labor could be done and did it; and the other after some years found positive delight in the laborious task of serving God with his pen (W. Williams, *Reminiscences of C. H. Spurgeon*,” p. 125).

(1) There are three advantages in writing in full.

The first of these is that the speaker acquires exactness of expression. Writing, as Lord Bacon puts it, “makes an exact man”; and his contemporary Bishop Hall testifies that he never durst climb into the pulpit until he had penned every word of his sermon in the same order wherein he hoped to deliver it, “although in the expression I listed not to be a slave of syllables.”

(2) The second advantage which comes from writing is literary finish.

The careless grammar, the unequal and ill-poised sentences of purely extemporaneous discourse are thus in a large measure avoided.

Lord Brougham laid it down “as a rule admitting of no exception, that a man will speak well in proportion as he has written well.”

Spurgeon commends to his students “the frequent writing of sermons that you may be preserved from a slipshod style”; F. W. Robertson frequently wrote out on Monday the sermon preached on the previous day; and Archbishop Magee “wrote carefully and labored much,” although in the pulpit he did not look at the manuscript.

(3) The third advantage in writing will be found in rhetorical efficiency, to which Quintilian probably refers when he says that only the use of the pen can make a man eloquent.

To write will not only furnish you:

(a) with a vocabulary carefully selected, it will also impress these words on your mind. “Loose bind, loose find” may be annotated in the preacher’s case as meaning that the words which cost him nothing in selection will play him false in his after use of them; and, on the other hand, the word which has given him pains and quickened his critical faculty in the study will be almost certain to come at his bidding in the pulpit.

(b) We need to do full justice, also, to the restraining influence which this habit of careful literary composition exercises on the preacher’s vocabulary. He writes what he means to speak; therefore his manuscript confines itself to written speech. He keeps himself to words and phrases which are oratorical.

Dr. Hook, for many years. among the foremost of English preachers, records this conviction when he says: "One of the things which makes very ordinary sermons from the pulpit tell, is this very circumstance, that I write precisely as I would talk, and that my sermons are thus as nearly as possible extemporaneous compositions" ("*Successful Preachers*," G. J. Davies, p. 141).

"Whoever can write a real living book," exclaims Carlyle, "is he not the great preacher?"

For our purpose it is fair to say that he is the great preacher who can write a real living sermon.

If we be asked as to the amount of time required for making a sermon in this way, we may reply that one morning should be spent in developing the theme and preparing a complete outline, and a second in writing out the sermon in full.

It is evident that further than this no rule can be laid down with safety. A late bishop of London maintained that a man could write a sermon in three hours, or not at all. Dean Farrar requires half an hour more than this. Certainly not more than four and a half hours are needed for the whole work of writing the sermon out in full, and carefully revising it.

The labor of writing is much lightened and the time of writing is much diminished by the fact that the preacher has before him his carefully prepared plan, which really represents the hard work of his pulpit preparation.

It is of the first importance that in composing and writing out his sermon the preacher be entirely free from interruption.

He should claim at the hands of his people the whole morning for study, and he is likely to find that his claim is more readily allowed by his congregation than it is urged by himself. From three to four hours a day of sure undisturbed work for four days in the week will, in the majority of cases, give him all the time he needs for preparing his two sermons.

A sermon, in our judgment, should be written at one sitting, and if the previous study has been conscientiously performed and the plan carefully written out, the sermon is likely to be written *currente calamo*. Experience will soon teach one that work thus thrown off, has an element of superiority all its own. "Such swiftness of mere writing," says Carlyle, "after due energy of preparation, is doubtless the right method."

Thus far the process which we are commending may seem to differ only slightly if at all from that which is pursued in some other methods. And yet there is already a difference. As contrasted with the sermon written and read, the outline is likely to be more careful, and the style of composition to be better suited to spoken discourse. As contrasted with the sermon memorized from a manuscript, more attention is paid to the thought than to the language, under the persuasion that when once a thought has been put into the best language that can be found for it the mind without an effort to recall the words will be likely to use them again when that thought has to be expressed (John Hall, D. D., "*God's Word through Preaching*," p. 272).

II. It remains for us to consider the second requisite in the composite method. This is free delivery

In order that a sermon thus carefully prepared should be preached with all the force and freshness of an extemporaneous discourse, what is needed?

1. First, a resolve to succeed.

The art of speaking without notes, like the swimming without corks, is never acquired by some preachers simply because they lack resolution. They do not believe that the art can be attained by them, and therefore they never try. Gilbert Stuart's recipe for teaching young painters their work may be commended with equal confidence to young preachers. "Teach them just as puppies are taught to swim - chuck them in."

"How shall I learn to speak?" someone inquired of Wendell Phillips, to receive his answer in two words only, "Keep speaking."

2. The second essential to success is attention to health. You must learn to keep under the body and bring it into subjection; to play the man as athlete, walker, bather; and to "**put a knife to your throat**" in the matter of diet before speaking.

3. As a third requisite let us mention regular habits of work.

At least one full hour should be set apart for preparation immediately before the delivery of the sermon. This may involve early rising, but that will do you no harm. Be alone previous to the service; keep deacon and sexton at arm's length; and see no visitors.

4. Of still greater importance, as an essential to success, is your rhetorical preparation.

Again we must insist that no effort should be made to commit words. Take care of the thought and the words will take care of themselves.

The sermon when ready for delivery may be read once aloud, and if there is a mirror in the room in which to study gesture or facial expression when necessary, so much the better. Once, certainly, it should be read silently. Pause and recapitulate as point after point is gained. Remember Schiller's maxim, "You do not know a subject thoroughly until you can play with it."

This process of infixing the sermon on the mind is not a serious one.

"When a good sermon is finished on Saturday, a reading that evening and another more hurried on the Lord's Day morning is sufficient" (John Hall, D. D.).

Only keep at it until you have completely mastered the discourse. "If you are feeling sure of your subject" was William Jay's experience, "you may be quite sure the discourse will go off well; the hard work is done before you get into the pulpit; to the well-prepared man the work is easy there."

5. The fifth essential is one with which no preacher can start out on his course. I mean pulpit experience.

It is not likely that, in this method of delivery, success will come at once.

On the contrary, the preacher who adopts it may be doomed to see himself for a time outstripped by his comrades; and there may be moments when he is tempted to fall back on the manuscript which, like charity, never faileth, or on the extemporaneous address which, in its fluent mediocrity, never runs dry.

Let him remember Sir Joshua Reynold's wise words, "Excellence is never granted to men but as the reward of labor." Do not because of transient despondency abandon this method for any other which promises greater ease or readier and more immediate success.

(1) Pulpit experience will in time bring ease.

As Emerson says shrewdly, "A great part of courage is the courage of having done the thing before."

Learn to concentrate your mind during the delivery of your sermons, and be thankful that previous preparation has given you something upon which to concentrate. Beware of harboring dissipating thought, and do not surrender before the distraction of accidental occurrences.

The young preacher need not fear nervousness half as much as he needs to fear the lack of it. "I am now an old man," was Luther's confession, "and I have been a long time employed in the business of preaching, but I never ascend the pulpit without trembling." Yet this was the man whose words were half-battles.

(2) With pulpit experience will come not only self-possession, but also a certain sense of reality which is due to the fact that the sermon is indeed a part of yourself. It has been given to you after personal grappling with the theme and personal labor in the choice of words. Not "I have my sermon," but "I am my sermon," is now your confident persuasion (Joseph Parker, D. D., "*Ad Clerum*," p. 45).

(3) Further, pulpit experience may be looked to to give you freedom and vividness of thought and expression. Your mind being stimulated as your speech, you will find some of the very best points in the sermon-sudden felicities of thought and language-come to you for the first time as you deliver your discourse. Do not be afraid of them. They are only late-comers, and should be treated as welcome guests. Put out your hand and take them into the ark. The Lord has neither shut you in, nor shut them out.

(4) I should add that pulpit experience is also likely to bring accuracy. The sermon which has been prepared with a conscience has surely been deeply impressed on your mind. It has reached the memory through the emotions, and therefore it will be most readily reproduced in delivery, often word for word.

It may be well to add that if in delivering the sermon you should find it hard or even impossible to recall some one point, it will be best to make no effort to recover it. Let it go. What you forget in the flow of speech probably ought to be forgotten. Your mind in the process of preaching is likely to be a better judge as to this, than is your mind in the process of preparation. The point may not be strictly germane to your subject; or it may never have been welded in with the rest; or perhaps it may not have become yours by a personal apprehension of its force and fitness.

An honored preacher of our own time confesses that when he prepared his first sermon he had imported into it foreign matter, and he further tells us how he was punished for doing it.

“A sermon must have three heads. The first was honestly my own, and the third, but I stole the second from McCheyne. I had no notes, and when I came to preach my sermon, the second had vanished as completely as if it had never been there; and that was the first and last time I ever stole even part of a sermon.”

In proportion as our material is our own, by discovery and arrangement, shall we have it at our command when we come to deliver our sermon.

In conclusion, we commend the composite method for five reasons:

1. First, because it avoids the objections which can be urged against the methods that we have been considering.

The delivery of the sermon is not broken by manuscript; it is not painful, as is too often the case with a memorized discourse; and there is less risk of its becoming careless or ill-balanced than there is with the sermon which is entirely extemporaneous.

“This is an age in which we want the inspiration of the extemporator, gazing face to face at his hearers, combined with the fullness and exactness of a written sermon. We want the accuracy and finish of the written discourse, with the freshness of thought worked out in the presence of living faces” (Davies, “*Successful Preachers*,” p. 154).

2. We commend it, further, because it seems to combine the largest number of excellencies.

- As much as the read sermon it has weight and exactness;
- As much as the memorized sermon it has rhetorical finish; and
- As much as the extemporaneous sermon it has ease and freshness and fertility of resource.

A lord chancellor of England holds that since preaching is only a department of the art of rhetoric, sermons ought to be carefully prepared, and he considers that “the best sermons are those which are carefully written out, and afterward delivered as if extempore.”

The pulpit agrees with the bar in this decision, at least it does so in the person of one of its greatest living ornaments.

Dr. Joseph Parker thinks that young preachers “should write their sermons with the greatest possible care and industry, and then put them away before preaching.”

3. We commend the method because it furnishes the preacher with a store of useful material.

The sermon is not lost. We should however be careful on each occasion of its re-delivery to work it over carefully, and enrich it with the fruits of our latest reading and ripest thought. On the question of recovering what has been prepared, Dr. John Hall says, “A couple of hours is quite enough to repossess one’s self of the right kind of sermon written twenty years ago” (*God’s Word Through Preaching*,” p. 141).

4. While all methods of delivery are unequal we may probably claim for the composite plan that it insures a tolerably uniform level of excellence.

From the sense of comparative failure no preacher can ever be completely free, and there will no doubt be times of profound depression under a conviction that the failure has been utter and unrelieved. But considering the high level on which the composite method moves, it may fairly be affirmed that the measure of uniformity which it reaches in (say) a year of preaching, is in its favor.

5. Finally, we commend the composite method because it does the most complete justice to the great work of preaching.

The importance of our vocation demands the exactness of written preparation. “A word thoughtlessly uttered may carry in it consequences of which at the moment we little dream.” Equally, however, does it demand that we so preach that human nature should be most powerfully affected.

We have no right to dispense with the reality, directness, and power of free speech, the crown and flower of eloquence. Our last word therefore is in favor of accurate preparation and free delivery.

~ end of chapter 22 ~

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