

THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

T. Harwood Pattison

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

RHETORICAL ELEMENTS IN THE SERMON (CONTINUED)

SUMMARY

I. WHAT IS PULPIT EXEGESIS?

Etymology of the word. Concerned, in the first instance, with verbal analysis. Distinct from exposition; but essential to it.

II. WHAT DOES PULPIT EXEGESIS REQUIRE?

1. A written revelation.
2. An intelligent interpretation of Scripture;

(1) Spiritual qualities needed:

- (a) Faith;
- (b) Reverence;
- (c) Unction.

(2) Intellectual qualities needed.

- A. The homiletical instinct.
- B. Scholarly tastes and habits; Seen:

- (a) In accurate treatment of the text;
- (b) In vigorous treatment of the theme.
- C. Logical acuteness.
- D. Sound judgment.

COUNSELS

III. THE ADVANTAGES OF EXEGESIS IN THE SERMON

1. It tends to hold the preacher down to his office.
2. It is in keeping with the philosophic method of research.

3. It carries with it a sense of authority.

- (1) Its influence on the preacher;
- (2) Its influence on the congregation.

Exegesis

THE intellectual foundations of the sermon should be laid in statement. When the sermon rises in the main from the text, it is natural that this element of statement should be largely exegetical. In this chapter we propose to consider pulpit exegesis, and to ask what it is, what it requires on the part of the preacher, and how an intelligent use of it will be of benefit both to him and to his congregation.

I. What then is pulpit exegesis?

The etymology of the word suggests that it means the bringing out into the light of clear understanding of an idea which is shut up in language. In the first instance it concerns itself with verbal analysis; but because words in the Bible stand to represent thought it inevitably deals with the truths of which the words are only the expression. Although exegesis will often result in exposition, it yet remains distinct from it, in that it keeps closer to the interpretation of words; but great harm has been done by expository sermons which have been prepared in willful or unconscious ignorance of exegesis.

Pulpit exegesis consists in gathering up the results of the grammatical interpretation of the Scriptures, and incorporating them in the sermon (Professor Briggs, "Biblical Study," Chap. II).

The word "**came**," in Matthew 20:28 ("**Even as the Son of man came**," etc.), suggests to Dr. Maclaren a theme, "Christ's teaching about his birth"; and furnishes him with an introduction in which he refers to some other occasions in which our Lord spoke of himself as coming, and then opens up the three main thoughts of the sermon itself.

II. What does pulpit exegesis require?

1. Plainly, first of all, a written revelation.

There can be no interpretation of thought until it has first found expression in some permanent outward form" (Dr. Thos. Arnold, "*Essay on the Interpretation of Scripture*").

For this reason every return to the thought of Scripture has been attended by a revival of exegesis. Erasmus, by publishing his edition of the New Testament; Melancthon, by his commentary on Romans; Colet, by lecturing on the Epistles of Paul in Oxford, and on the Lord's Prayer in London, helped to lay the foundations for Protestant exegesis.

At the heart of the Reformation of the sixteenth century burned this impelling passion for an intelligent apprehension of what the words of the Bible meant.

“When I was a monk,” says Luther, “I allegorized everything; but now I have given up allegorizing, and my first and best art is to explain the Scriptures according to the proper sense; for it is in the literal sense that power, doctrine, and art reside” (“*Sermons*,” Vol. II).

2. Pulpit exegesis also requires an intelligent interpretation of the written revelation.

The call to the Christian ministry carries with it the promise of divine aid in interpreting the Word of God (I Corinthians 4:1, 2, II Corinthians 2:17; II Timothy 2:1, 2), but this in no arbitrary or miraculous way.

We will glance, therefore, at some of the qualities which will aid the preacher who aims to excel in exegesis. These qualities are spiritual and intellectual.

(1) What spiritual qualities will he need?

(a) First, *Faith*.

The delight in verbal analysis which the preacher feels should be chiefly due to his conviction that now he is penetrating into the true meaning of God’s Word. He is thinking the thoughts of God after him. So Luther expressed a truth which all church history corroborates when he declared his conviction that “if ever the Bible is to be given to the world, it must be by those who are Christians, and have the mind of Christ.”

(b) A second spiritual quality will be *Reverence*.

This will not only carry the preacher into the heart of words that are rich in divine truth, so that what to others is only a barren bush to him will burn with the presence of God, but it will also temper his pleasure in expounding the Bible with a devout respect for its authorship, origin, and purpose.

If we have real reverence for Scripture and a firm belief in that which it declares, we shall never strain a single one of its words or phrases, or strain a single fact to make it fit them. Abstinence from such dishonesty will assuredly bring its reward in clearer apprehension of the whole record hereafter (F. D. Maurice, “*Faith and Action*,” p. 215).

(c) A third and very important spiritual quality is *Uncion*.

We are often surprised by the insight of some simple-minded and illiterate student of the Bible, who will, with no knowledge of Hebrew or Greek, bring out the precise meaning hidden in a Scripture word or phrase. But was not this what Christ promised to his disciples? (Matthew 11:25; I Corinthians 2:14; I John 2:20).

Did not his apostles witness that it was in them? The things of the Spirit of God must be spiritually discerned. “For the giving of Scripture, and the receiving of Scripture, we need the living action of the living Spirit of God.” It is by the anointing from the Holy One that we know all things. Coleridge said truly, “The Bible without the Spirit is a sundial by moonlight.”

Richard Baxter studied, his text on his knees, with his finger on the passage from which he proposed to preach, and on his lips the prayer, "Lord, reveal even this to me! Show me thy meaning!"

(2) Scarcely less necessary to correct and profitable exegesis are certain intellectual qualities.

A. First of these must be mentioned the homiletical instinct, by means of which a preacher seizes almost at once on the material best adapted to his purpose, and throws it into the form fittest for use in the sermon. Distinct from other serviceable qualities in the preacher, this seems to be indispensable if the sermon is to be a sermon indeed. A man may be a theologian, he may have careful training in philosophy, he may even possess a distinct literary quality of his own, and yet lacking the homiletical instinct he may fail in the pulpit. Take Alford's or Meyer's '*Notes on the New Testament.*' Read them aloud. No congregation in this world, except one composed of theological students, would listen to them for five minutes" (Hugh Stowell Brown).

B. Further, to excel in exegesis the preacher should have scholarly tastes and habits. These will show themselves in two ways.

(a) First, in accurate treatment of the text.

Study carefully its construction and attend to the weight and force of particles. Compare passages in which the same words or phrases occur elsewhere than in your text. Often a whole sermon will lie in a word.

A living preacher illustrated this when he took for his theme, "*Comfort in the tenses of a verb,*" and for his text, "**Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver; in whom we trust that he will yet deliver**" (II Corinthians 1:10).

How suggestive for the purposes of a sermon is a study of Paul's use of antithesis in another passage (I Corinthians 1:22-24). Follow the two parallel lines in this passage, the one indicated by the words, "**a sign,**" "**a stumbling-block,**" "**the power of God**"; the other by the words, "**wisdom,**" "**foolishness,**" "**the wisdom of God,**" and you have the natural divisions for a sermon on Christ crucified, in which the human side of the cross may be contrasted with the divine.

(b) The scholarly habit will also show itself in vivid and vigorous treatment of the theme.

Take time for questions of interest which are suggested by your subject. Bring into the discussion the literature of the text, its history, its critical treatment, and the science, archaeology, and natural history connected with it.

C. A third quality of great importance is logical acuteness.

This is essential to skill in analysis and synthesis. It is the faculty which perceives and seizes upon distinctions, resemblances, and connections in thought.

Tholuck admired especially this power in Jonathan Edwards, and when a Transatlantic visitor inquired of him what he regarded as the characteristic of the American mind, he replied “Schaifsicht” (sharpsightedness), “the power of distinction and the power of analysis” (*Life of Dr. Ed. Kirk*,” p. 203).

D. To the qualities already enumerated another must be added, namely, sound judgment.

You need to know just how far to carry your analysis, and just where to stop. Let me counsel the young preacher enamored of his exegetical skill to see to it that he does not let his exegesis concern itself only with words. Be not one of those

learned philologers who chase
a panting syllable through time and space.

Avoid mere grammatical hair-splitting, and striving about words to no profit. “Learning rightly employed seasons like salt; but if all be salt, what remains to season?”

Canon Liddon significantly says, “The world was saved by the substance of the message from Heaven and not by the words that conveyed it”; and Matthew Arnold put a note of warning into an epigram when he criticized the revisers of the Authorized version of the New Testament as seeming to think that “man was made for the aorist, and not the aorist for man.”

The undue emphasis on words which leads one preacher to declare that he who understands grammar so as to truly interpret the language of God is to his mind the theologian of the day (C. H. Spurgeon), is the better for being modified by another who reminds us that “we are often impoverished in a religious sense by our grammatical cleverness. God is not a God of etymology and syntax, else salvation would be of grammar, not of grace” (Dr. J. Parker).

And in your exegesis recognize the full scope of Scripture.

In a recent trial a lawyer of great eminence, who had the conduct of one side, when he came to reply surprised his junior by the resolution not to encumber the presentation of the case in its largest sense by introducing all its trumpery details.

“I am going,” said he, “to deal with it in a much larger sense.” The result showed that he was right. Minute criticism is apt to err. Losing sight of this “larger sense,” it narrows and belittles the theology of the pulpit and gives occasion to Emerson to declare that “analysis has run to seed in unbelief.”

So Shakespeare reminds us in “Timon of Athens,” that

There is boundless theft in limited profession.

Selden packs the same thought into his famous saying, “No man is the wiser for his learning,” and Milton expands it in his noble prose:

There is scarce one saying in the Gospel but must be read with limitations and distinctions to be rightly understood; for Christ gives no full comments or continued discourses, but speaks oft in monosyllables, like a master scattering the heavenly grain of his doctrine like pearls here and there, which requires a skillful and laborious gatherer, who must compare the words he finds with other precepts, with the end of every ordinance, and with the general analogy of evangelical doctrine; otherwise, many particular sayings would be but strange, repugnant riddles.

In a word, keep your exegesis subservient to your aim. Interpret Scripture. Do not spend a moment of your half-hour over details which only divert the mind from the main purpose of your discourse.

His successor in London with justice extols Edward Irving, because in his preaching “by bringing out the fullness of the all-embracing Bible, and by carrying hearers who had hitherto rested in texts right into the truths which these texts contained, he relieved evangelism from the reproach of intellectual poverty.”

III. The advantages of exegesis in the sermon

1. Obviously it tends to hold the preacher down to his office as an interpreter of Scripture.

In every sermon the two essential elements are *explanation* and *application*. Without explanation the argumentative part of a sermon is apt to be weak in its premises and therefore futile in its conclusions; while the hortatory part is almost sure to lack in force, and the preacher so fights as one that beateth the air.

2. Obviously also, sound exegesis is in keeping with the philosophical method of research, that is, to seek for truth and to explain it; and all inquiry, whether in the realm of mind or of matter, should formulate itself in an explanation, or exegesis.

No attack upon the dogmatism of science can carry any weight so long as it is urged by a preacher who is himself falling into the pulpit snare of mistaking assertion for proof.

One of the most effective weapons in the hands of the Reformers is wielded by Melancthon when he avers, “A single certain and simple sense is everywhere to be sought in connection with the rules of grammar, dialectics, and rhetoric.”

To a company of students the Duke of Argyle says: “Analysis is the one all-powerful instrument of research in the physical sciences.” You will find it not less powerful in casting light on the operations of the mind itself. “If anything I have ever written or spoken has been of the least use to anyone in dealing with the great problems of life, it has been but an instinct which I have had from my earliest years to examine and analyze the wording of every proposition which is presented for our acceptance.”

3. A third advantage in exegesis wisely used in the sermon is that it carries with it a sense of authority. This authority is seen in its influence alike on the preacher himself, on his sermon, and on his congregation.

(1) For the preacher it may be enough to remind him of the conviction which two of the greatest masters of his craft have left us.

Luther says:

“In all sciences the ablest professors are they who have thoroughly mastered the text; *Bonus Textuarius, bonus Theologus,*” the best theologian is he who is most versed in the Holy Scriptures (Luther, “Table Talk.”).

Jonathan Edwards in one powerful sentence put a truth destructive of all loose pulpit methods when he declared, “He that doth not understand, can receive no faith nor any other grace” (Edwards, sermon on “*The Importance of the Knowledge of Divine Truth*”).

How great is the influence of this element of exegesis in the sermon what has already been said should sufficiently show. The integrity of the sermon will be affected by it. Convinced that it is his duty to interpret the Word of God honestly, and that his sermon will be effective in proportion as he does so, the preacher will keep himself to simple lines.

He will not accommodate his text to the subject on which he wishes to speak; he will avoid motto or fragmentary texts; he will keep clear of allegorizing; and he will found his sermon on the rock of a true and faithful exposition of the words and thoughts of his text.

And it is safe to add that the freshness of our sermons largely depends on our use of sound exegesis - this because exegesis gives us thought, which was what Daniel Webster intended when he said, “I get my ideas by attention to definitions.”

To two things Dr. Maclaren traces any influence he has been able to exert in the direction of stimulating and influencing young ministers:

- First to hard work at his Hebrew Bible and Greek Testament; and, secondly,
- To the fact that from the beginning of his ministry he has endeavored to make his preaching expository and explanatory of the Word of God as he understood it.

What he adds it will be well for all preachers to remember: Why so many people are tired of preaching is because some preachers merely take a text on which to hang pretty things without any regard to its true meaning. If God thought it worthwhile to give us a book, surely we should give its truths the meaning he designed.

(2) This mature conviction of one who has for over fifty years stood in the forefront among the preachers of our Protestant Christendom is significant for what it says as to the congregation also. A careful and intelligent exegesis in the sermon trains hearers to look not for human opinions but for the Word of the Lord. This it is which meets unbelief with the sword of the Spirit, arouses the dull conscience and enlightens the darkened mind, forces indecision to take action, confirms faith in its confidence, and throughout the congregation quickens the spirit of honest inquiry.

Prof. A. B. Bruce does well to remind preachers that a minister has to educate the minds of his people as well as their hearts. It is due alike to its great history, to its vast opportunity, and to its weighty obligation, to insist that the pulpit must be redeemed from the contempt into which pious platitudes and commonplaces, and the rhetoric which, like Ephraim, feedeth on wind, have done their utmost to bring it.

The failure of more than one great spiritual movement to arrest and retain the intellectual forces of the age is to be traced in part to the lack of trustworthy scholarship and conscientious exegetical skill on the part of those who directed it.

On the other hand, who shall estimate the value to the Protestant Reformation of the revival of sound biblical exegesis?

Take that away from the sermons of Luther and Calvin, from the expositions of Colet, from the treatises of Melancthon and Erasmus, and humanly speaking, that mightiest religious movement in church history lies like Samson shorn of his strength.

~ end of chapter 14 ~

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