

THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

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CHAPTER SEVEN

THE THEME

SUMMARY

I. DEFINITION

1. The theme is the subject of the discourse.
2. Must be derived from the text.
3. Modified by the purpose which the preacher has in view.

- (1) He should always have a purpose;
- (2) One theme sufficient.

II. THE ADVANTAGES OF HAVING A THEME

1. Insures arrangement in the discourse.
2. Promotes unity:

- (1) The theme to be distinctly announced;
- (2) To be evident throughout the discourse;
- (3) To remain the final and ruling impression.

3. Gives compactness:

- (1) Themes commended which can be distinctly defined;
- (2) Limited themes to be preferred.

III. SOURCES FROM WHICH THEMES MAY BE DRAWN

1. The Bible.
2. Pastoral work.
3. Our life, and special occasions in it.
4. Intercourse with other preachers.

COUNSELS:

- (1) Have a sermon notebook;
- (2) Gather materials from all sources;
- (3) Keep a list of the themes preached upon.

NOTE: As to the difficulty of finding theme.

IV. CHARACTERISTICS BY WHICH THEMES SHOULD BE DISTINGUISHED

1. Clearness:

- (1) In thought;
- (2) In wording.

2. Propriety:

- (1) Avoid remote themes;
- (2) Maintain the true level of pulpit discourse.

3. Freshness.

4. Fullness and sufficiency:

- (1) Deal with important themes;
- (2) With the great saving truths of Christianity.

NOTE: Courses of sermons.

Definition of the Theme

I. From the text we pass to the theme of the sermon

This we define as the subject upon which the preacher proposes to speak, drawn from a passage of Scripture and modified by the purpose which the preacher has in view.

1. The theme is the subject of the discourse.

What Canon Liddon so often claimed for the truth of the Gospel we must insist on in the theme. It must "know its frontiers." And in proportion as the preacher keeps himself to his office of messenger, the Word of the Lord which has come to him will give both center and circumference to his subject. The fact that the sermon has a distinct and limited theme makes it a sermon indeed; that is, a distinct and limited "word." This it is that distinguishes it from the essay, which is allowed to be more discursive. The difference lies indeed in the distinction between the etymology of the words "*sermon*" and "*essay*."

2. The theme must be derived from the passage of Scripture which the preacher has chosen for his text.

So dependent is the one on the other that we may say that the theme should be evident in the text as one of its ruling ideas. The preacher who, at a children's service, takes as his theme, "*Unpleasant Children*," and as his text the words, "**Their houses shall be full of doleful creatures**" (Isaiah 13:21), may have been as unfortunate in his family as he was in his text; he could hardly have been more so.

To preach a sermon with the title, "*Death the Interpreter*," and the theme, "The advantage to a great cause in the death of its great leaders," from the sublime words of Jesus, "**It is expedient for you that I go away, for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you**" (John 16:), is to merge the special thought of the text in a commonplace generality. On the other hand, the "*Unnaturalness of Irreligion*" sets the theme of the inquiry, "**If then I be a father where is mine honor?**" (Malachi 1:6) in a fresh light; and Paul's exhortation, "**be not conformed to this world**" (Romans 12:2), is happily struck off as "*Enlisted against Environment*."

3. The theme should be modified by the purpose which the preacher has in view in his sermon.

(1) To have a clearly defined purpose in your mind in every sermon which you prepare will save it from aiming at nothing and hitting it every time (Whately), which is the chief end, one fears, of many sermons. "The essential ground of a new sermon is a new spirit. The preacher has a new thought, sees the sweep of a more comprehensive tendency" (Emerson).

(2) A clear purpose will also insure your having only one theme in your sermons.

There may be more than one in the text, but there should not be more than one in the sermon. With characteristic frankness Professor Jowett confessed that the fault of his sermons was that they had "many crude ideas and jump from one to the other, instead of a single one well developed." That Archbishop Magee was so great a preacher was largely due to his observing the rule to have one idea only in each sermon, and to arrange every sentence with a view to that.

II. What are the advantages of having a theme?

We mention three:

1. The theme insures arrangement in the discourse.

The theme is the sermon condensed; the sermon is the theme unfolded (Fenelon). We would advise the preacher who is tempted to wander to write up the theme of his sermon which he is preparing, in some conspicuous place near his desk, and now and then to glance at it and ask, "Am I keeping close to my subject?" In doing so he may please himself by recalling the precedent of Pliny, "I look upon it as the first duty of any writer frequently to throw his eyes upon his title-page and to consider well the subject he proposed to himself."

2. As a second advantage, the theme promotes unity in the discourse.

(1) As soon as may be let the theme of the discourse be distinctly announced.

Ruskin quotes with approval the opinion of men practiced in public address that hearers “are never so much fatigued as by the endeavor to follow a speaker who gives them no clue to his purpose” (“*Sesame and Lilies*,” p. 6). “A good sermon,” to recur to Archbishop Magee, “should be like a wedge, all leading to a point.” More than one point does not insure workmanlike execution in either the wedge or the sermon.

(2) We gauge the excellence of a sermon among other things by this:

- Is the theme evident throughout?
- Would a late-comer, arriving when the discourse was well under way, learn what were the text and theme before he had been listening five minutes?
- Statement, argument, illustration, application, do they all bear closely upon the subject? If they do, the theme will remain as the final and ruling impression on the hearer’s mind.

(3) The theme when you announced it amounted to a promise made to the congregation. Have you kept it?

Or is there need to apply to your discourse the Puritan criticism in early New England days, “The text was more proper to the business than the sermon” (“*The Pilgrim Fathers of New England*,” by Dr. John Brown, p.309).

3. As a third advantage in having a theme, we say that it helps to give compactness to the discourse.

(1) We recommend themes which are capable of distinct definition and over which the sermon will knit itself closely.

The great thing is, as Napoleon said, “*Savoir se borner*” (To know our limitations). For lack of remembering his own maxim, Napoleon was flung back from the icy wastes of Russia and closed his days within limits pathetically small for so great a genius. Many a preacher has also “found his Waterloo” by aiming at more than he could handle. As Wesley puts it, he grasps at the stars and sticks in the mud.

(2) So that we should say that themes which are limited are to be preferred to themes which are vast.

“It is limitation,” says Goethe, “which makes the poet, the artist, the man.” Restriction of theme, however, is not to be mistaken for pettiness of theme. Keep among the great subjects for pulpit discourses; only be content with one aspect of a truth at a time. Restriction of theme allows you to make your sermon measurably complete, it stimulates your own inventive powers, and it quickens the interest of your hearers.

The greatness of England is largely owing to its being an island, and a limited theme will sometimes - to carry the parallel one point further - give full play to your powers of acquisition. “*The Goodness of God*” is too vast a theme.

It will beguile you into vague rhetoric and leave no clear impression; but “The goodness of God as it is exemplified in the creation and sustenance of man,” is a subject which, by limiting our field, stimulates our powers of observation.

III. We may now consider the sources from which themes may be drawn

1. The Bible is, of course, the first and most fruitful of these.

All that needs to be said here is by way of warning to the preacher that neither texts nor themes are to be found by searching for them in a professional spirit. Matthew Arnold was right in thinking that to have “to look about for subjects was a horrible thing, and when it has to, be done week after week a recurrent terror which might well drive one mad.” But no such fate awaits the preacher who loves and lives with his Bible. While he is reading it aloud in the public service, in the Bible class, or in the homes of his people, as well as when he makes it the man of his counsel. In his own hours of devotion, the Bible will furnish him with a treasury of themes.

2. A rich quarry will be found by the faithful minister in his pastoral work.

Here experimental themes of great acceptance will be suggested to him. The sermons of William Jay, of Bath, are models still of the best kind of experimental preaching, and they deal in the main with just such topics. “*Domestic Happiness*,” and the “*Disappointments of Life*,” and the “*House of Obed-Edom*,” are no doubt themes more homely than heroic, but in this very fact lies their excellence.

Treating of “the perennial truisms of the grave and the bedchamber, of shifting fortunes, of the surprises of destiny, and the emptiness of the answered vow,” our preaching may with advantage follow very closely the lines of our daily life. With the alteration of one word only we may apply to the preacher what John Morley has said of Macaulay: “The great success of the best kind of preaching is always the noble and imaginative handling of the commonplace.”

3. We enlarge our view only a little when we indicate the special occasions in our more public life as themes which claim notice in the pulpit.

As one of a community, as a citizen with a stake in the country, as a man to whom nothing human is foreign, the minister is called to set the duties and privileges of this life of ours in the light of Christian training (See R. W. Dale’s “*Sermons on Special Occasions*”).

The main source of the interesting in life, as Mr. John Burroughs wisely insists, is “human association. The railroad may be at war with every feature of the landscape through which it passes, but it has a tremendous human background.” While confessing his dislike to sensational preaching, Emerson grants that it is impossible “to pay no regard to the day’s events, to the public opinion of the times, to the stirring shout of party, to the calamities and prosperities of our time and country” (Emerson Lectures, “*The Preacher*”).

4. It is obvious that sermon themes are often suggested by intercourse with men who are themselves preachers. We shall be more likely to weave new patterns if we compare the product of our several looms with those of others of like occupation with ourselves; and still more fertile to many minds will be the intercourse with books. Spurgeon could find a theme of immediate moment for the pulpit in the evening paper, and the preacher who reads widely in history, philosophy, poetry, will never want for subjects.

(1) In your sermon notebook jot down each text of Scripture, each sermon germ, each theme as it occurs to you.

(2) Gather fish of every kind; put down everything that seems to have “large and discursible contents in it, whether Christian or heathen” (Dr. N. Burton, Yale “*Lectures on Preaching*,” p. 48).

(3) Keep a list of the subjects on which you have preached, and now and then go through it.

By doing this you will be more likely to preach on the whole round of truth, not necessarily in any systematic way, but rather as opportunity offers. Payson once made an analysis of all the sermons which he had given to his people for six months, and embodied it in one sermon which he preached to them. “They were astonished,” is his testimony; “and I was astonished at the amount of truth which had been presented to them.”

Dr. R. W. Dale says that he sometimes “drew up in December or January a list of some of the subjects on which he resolved to preach during the following twelve months.” The retrospect of one of these preachers and the foresight of the other are commended to any young minister who is troubled, as Dean Stanley was when he began his work, with a fear that he should never find subjects on which to preach.

Times of temporary mental impoverishment or weariness will no doubt come, but in such a case the preacher may infer that he has been working more than he has been thinking or thinking more than he has been working. A glut in the market is almost as unfavorable to sound trade as are mills which lie idle. The one indeed leads to the other.

What old Dr. Bellamy, of Connecticut, said to the young minister who asked him what he should do to supply himself with matter for his sermons, may be repeated here with advantage: “Fill up the cask, fill up the cask, fill up the cask; and when if you tap it anywhere you will get a good stream. But if you put in but little, it will dribble, dribble, dribble; and you must tip, tip, tip.”

The preacher who is at the same time in touch with God and man, “true to the kindred points of Heaven and home,” has no reason to fear that the day will come which does not bring with it just the message to which it needs to listen.

IV. By what characteristics should the theme be distinguished?

We mention four:

Clearness,
Propriety,

Freshness,
Fullness or Sufficiency.

1. Of these we place Clearness first. The thought of the theme should be clear. It is like the direction on a letter, about which one ought not to need to ask twice what it means. If you are preaching on the words of Paul, "**The love of Christ constraineth us**" (II Corinthians 5:14), your theme should not leave it in doubt whether the reference is to Christ's love to us or to our love to Christ. Only a preacher of a nebulous mind would announce as the theme of, a discourse on the words, "**it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell,**" "*The All-comprehendingness of the Divine Humanity*" (John Pulsford, D. D., on Colossians 1:15-20).

On the other hand, a theme to the full as stimulating to intelligent hearers is deduced from Matthew 10:40, 41, "*The Principle of Moral Identification.*"

Clear thought is especially necessary in themes dealing with the mysteries of life and faith. But, indeed, Carlyle's maxim is everywhere true that "the first and last secret of art is to get thorough intelligence of the fact to be painted, represented, or in whatever way set forth."

(2) Great care should also be taken to have the wording of the theme as clear as possible.

The preacher should practice himself in forms of expression compact and yet comprehensive. What can be the mental condition of the preacher who announces as the subject of his morning sermon, "*The Magnitude, Light, and Revelations of the Guiding Stars of Individuals and Nations in their Respective Firmaments*"?

On the other hand, as illustrations of brief but sufficient forms, we may select:

- "*God's Glory in Concealing; Man's Honor in Discovering*" (Proverbs 25:2);
- "*Christ's Gift to Us, and Ours to Him*" (Titus 2:14);
- "*The Tempted Sinner and the Tempted Saviour*" (Hebrews 2:18);
- "*Jesus at a Stand*" (Mark 10:49);
- "*Robinson Crusoe's Text*" (Psalm 50:15).

Such themes as these are readily remembered.

2. The theme should further be distinguished by propriety.

Let the preacher refrain from choosing subjects of no present interest. Better, as Daniel Webster advised, "take a text from St. Paul and preach a sermon from the newspaper."

(1) Themes which are remote, abstruse, and antiquarian should be avoided.

The state of the Episcopal Church in the days of the Stuarts must have been deplorable if, as a Royal Commission reported, one preacher invited his congregation to "investigate with him the exact period at which Isaac was weaned; and another to follow the train of thought which led him to the conclusion that previous to the fall the serpent walked erect on its tail.

(2) There is a certain recognized level for pulpit discourse.

Do not intentionally sink below it. Remember that what might suit a Bible class may be out of place in a sermon. There are too many subjects announced in the newspapers as themes for the coming Sunday which are mere baits to catch the curious and unwary, entirely unworthy of any Christian minister.

A single word of warning should be sufficient to guard the preacher against pandering to the gossip of the hour or the unwholesome taste for supping on horrors. Irreverence in themes is never pardonable. The preacher who discoursing from the words, "**Rejoice because your names are written in heaven,**" announces as his text, "*The Chirography of our Lord,*" can only have reached this bad pre-eminence by years of rhetorical audacity.

3. At the same time the preacher should aim at freshness in both the thought and the wording of his theme.

"Originality does not consist in saying new things, but in treating old things in a new way" (Goethe). A careful exegetical study of Scripture will be likely to contribute to this welcome element of freshness, alike in the theme and the sermon.

The intense affection of the father for his son in the parable of the Prodigal expressing itself in the verb "**kissed**" (Luke 15:20) gives us a new and stronger view of the forgiving love of God for the penitent.

"*The fellowship of duty*" is a happy theme to deduce from the words of Jesus to John the Baptist: "**Thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness**" (Matthew 3:15).

"*Wonder in the wrong place*" (Luke 8:25) quickens our curiosity in a legitimate way.

"*The capacity of religion extirpated by disuse*" (Matthew 25:28), is Bushnell's fresh setting of a familiar text; and in the broken sentence "**We cannot but . . .**" (Acts 4:20), Dr. W. M. Taylor finds the striking theme, "*The Irrepressible in Christian Testimony.*"

In themselves such themes are almost sermons.

4. Fullness and Sufficiency should also characterize the themes for pulpit discourse.

(1) No preacher worthy of the name should be afraid of dealing with important themes. Dr. Johnson confessed that "he always went into stately shops" in the London which he knew so well. We may with advantage follow his example in the Bible which we should know even better. Colonel Ingersoll's advice to the speaker may be quoted here: "He should never clog his discourse with details. He should never dwell upon particulars, he should touch universals, because the great truths are for all time." It is obvious that the preacher, who discusses great subjects, if he does it in the right spirit and with adequate preparation, will challenge the attention of his hearers.

In a down-town chapel in Birmingham, England, Dr. R. W. Dale through all his long ministry held a great congregation of men and women who learned to do their best thinking as they listened to him. He was wont to warn preachers that “the flowering shrubs of Mount Carmel” would not keep their churches full. “The mysteries of sin and love, of death and judgment, were never long absent from his thoughts,” and therefore they were constantly brought under the consideration of his hearers.

(2) We add that the preacher will do well to discourse frequently upon the great saving truths of Christianity.

One of Spurgeon’s last testimonies before his brethren was in favor of texts which, although they are hackneyed and commonplace, are still the texts which bring men to Christ. “Looking through a longish ministry,” he said, “he had found more converts traceable to such texts as: “**This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance,**’ etc., and “**God so loved the world,**” etc., than to others, by one hundred to one.”

And his own course was the most eloquent comment on this his final counsel to his brother ministers. “It was not easy to keep to these old truths; but real genius lay in making those few things in number to be infinite in their variety; in setting them forth so that there should be sufficient novelty and freshness to attract, while the convincing, vivifying, and sanctifying truth should be always the same” (Address, London Baptist Association, 1887).

Perhaps this is the best place in which to counsel the preacher to prepare and deliver courses of sermons. Either morning or evening he may always with advantage have such a course running. A course of sermons should not be too long. The days are past in which even Matthew Henry would be tolerated if he preached for twenty years on the “*Questions of the Bible,*” although filial piety might urge in extenuation that his father, Philip Henry, took forty sermons in order to do justice to the parable of the Prodigal Son. A text which at first you prepare to deal with in a single sermon will often break up into three or four. Such short courses are valuable. For example, in Jude 20, 21, the words, “**building up,**” “**praying in,**” “**keep yourselves,**” “**looking for,**” will furnish the four progressive stages of a course on “*The Divine Life in Man.*”

The preacher will do well rather to err by being too brief than by being too long in such courses.

The gift in tediousness which kindled Thomas Fuller’s admiration for the German divine who, proposing to expound Isaiah, took twenty-one years over the first chapter and “yet finished it not,” is no longer counted a virtue; and we have now no sympathy for the rabbi who promised to write a commentary upon part of Ezekiel, but before beginning, “requested the Jews to furnish him with three hundred tons of oil for the use of his lamp while he should be engaged in the work.”

There was little danger of this illustrious scholar coming under the condemnation passed on the Foolish Virgins. Everything would go out before his lamp. In these degenerate days the congregation certainly would.

A continuous exposition of any one book of the Bible may last over many months, but a course which has as its motif one thought or theme should be much shorter.

COURSES OF SERMONS

This list may suggest as well as enumerate subjects that can with advantage be arranged in brief courses (See Phelps' *"Theory of Preaching,"* p. 601).

- *"The Christian Names of the Bible,"*
- *"Conversions by the Way"* (in the ministry of Jesus),
- *"Crowds of the Bible,"*
- *"First Things in Human History,"*
- *"First Things in the Christian Church,"*
- *"Fools of the Bible,"*
- *"The Home,"*
- *"The Lord's Prayer."*
- *"Miracles by the Way"* (in the ministry of Jesus),
- *"The Paradoxes of the Gospel,"*
- *"The Seven Sayings of Jesus on the Cross,"*
- *"Supreme Realities,"*
- *"The Ten Commandments,"*
- *"Things Said Against Jesus."*

~ end of chapter 7 ~

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