THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

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CHAPTER TWO

THE TEXT

SUMMARY

I. ITS MEANING

1. Derivation of the word "*text*."
2. May include more of a passage than is read.
3. More commonly means the special words read by the preacher, from which he proposes to speak, and which are often detached from the context:

(1) The theme should, as a rule, cover the whole text;
(2) Yet one theme need not necessarily exhaust the text;
(3) It is well that the text should form a complete rhetorical sentence.

II. THE HISTORY OF THE TEXT

1. The Jewish custom.
2. The practice of the apostles compared with that of their immediate successors.
3. Later history, "*postulating*" and "*declaring*."

III. USES SERVED BY THE TEXT

1. Disadvantages:

(1) The use of a text cramps the liberty of preaching;
(2) Is not favorable to the most intelligent treatment of Scripture;
(3) Is artificial.

2. Advantages:

(1) A cure for desultoriness;
(2) Insures some reference to Scripture;
(3) Carries with it a sense of authority;
(4) Is not confined to preaching.

IV. THE STRUCTURE OF THE TEXT

1. Reverence demands that it form a complete sentence.
2. Yet "*fractional texts*" may be used.
3. As to the length of the text.
4. The text may be drawn from more than one passage:

(1) Complementary texts;
(2) Contrasted texts;
(3) Texts made up of the same words in various connections;
(4) Series of sermons on contrasted or complementary texts.

Its Meaning

I. The meaning of the text

1. To recall the derivation of the familiar word "*text*" is to recognize the bounds which it naturally sets to the sermon. Taken from the Latin *textus*, it suggests something woven into the entire web of the discourse. Plainly it points back to a time when preaching was altogether expository, when the sermon was little more than a running comment on the Scripture for the day, which in its turn formed the text.

2. The text may still mean the whole passage with which the preacher proposes to deal, although he may read only a few words taken from it. Horace Bushnell's sermon on "*Unconscious Influence*," is prefaced by the words "**Then went in also that other disciple**" (John 20:3-8), but in its development it is based on the entire narrative from which that fragment is taken.

3. More commonly we understand by the text the special words read by the preacher as those on which he proposes to speak, and which he often wholly detaches from the context. When Guthrie discourses on "*The Messenger*," and takes for his text, "**Moreover the word of the Lord came unto me saying, Son of man**" (Ezekiel 36:16, 17), he uses the context scarcely at all.

Since the sermon is based on certain words upon which the preacher proposes to speak, it is best that the theme should. as a rule, cover the whole text.

A limited use of the term "*text*" has anyhow the advantage that all the text can be pressed into the service of the sermon.

At the same time a single theme need not necessarily exhaust the text. In one verse in Ezekiel, Guthrie finds three themes, and from each of these he preaches a sermon (Ezekiel 36:26).

Whenever possible let the text as it is announced form a complete rhetorical sentence. To use a few fragmentary words is open to many objections, as we shall see; and certainly not the least of them is the offense to the ear, which naturally delights in the balance and harmony of sound.

Its History

II. A few words may here be devoted to the history of the text

1. The Jewish custom was to read the Scriptures, which of themselves almost formed the discourse without any added comment. Gradually, however, partly because the language was no longer that of their daily lives, and partly because there was need to justify the additions made by the scribes to the simple law, it came to be the fashion to indulge in extended exposition and application. So Jesus preached in the synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4:20); and to Paul and Barnabas when worshiping at Antioch in Pisidia came the invitation from the ruler of the synagogue there, after the reading of the Scripture, "**Ye men and brethren, if ye have any word of exhortation for the people, say on**" (Acts 13:15).

2. The apostles, believing themselves inspired teachers, often preached without texts; and the fact that their successors did not follow their example shows that for themselves they made no such claim. Inspiration ceased, and henceforth authority was found in the use of the words of the now complete Scriptures.

3. Until the beginning of the thirteenth century the sermon was little more than an expansion of the text, itself often a long passage or even an entire book.

Such preaching was called "*postulating*," and was distinguished from "*declaring*," a name given to that kind of discourse in which the speaker said what he desired to say without taking any text. In the thirteenth century the habit of preaching from a single verse, or a few verses only, became common, and very soon we find the elaborate analysis, the divisions and subdivisions, which are now so usual in the sermon. They no doubt helped the hearer to follow and remember the discourse, yet they date from the days when medieval theologians reduced all thinking to rigid and formal systems.

Its Use

III. This brings us to the use served by the text

Undoubtedly it has advantages, although these are not without the defects of their excellencies.

1. Three disadvantages we must mention.

(1) *The first is that a slavish adherence to a text cramps the liberty of preaching*.

Voltaire says with reason that for a preacher to speak at length on a brief quotation, and to make his whole discourse bear upon that, "appears to be trifling little worthy the dignity of the ministry. The text becomes a kind of motto or rather enigma, which the discourse develops."

(2) *A second objection to the use of the text is that it is often fatal to the most intelligent treatment of Scripture*. Chopping the Bible into fragments, the practice pursued from a host of pulpits through long centuries of abuse, leaves us amazed that the book has survived during centuries of dislocation and dismemberment.

The words of Erasmus are needed still: "To get at the real meaning it is not enough to take four or five isolated words; you must look where they came from, what was said, by whom it was said, to whom it was said, at what time, on what occasion, in what words, what preceded, what follows" (Seebohm's "Oxford Reformers," p. 258).

Each clause in this wise and weighty sentence should sound the death-knell for a multitude of sermons.

(3) *A third objection is that the use of the text is artificial*. It tends to make preaching monotonous, unnatural, and unreal; and the step is a very short one from the unreal to the uninteresting. Indeed, what preacher has not at times found himself chafing against being forced by custom to maintain the unvarying habit of announcing his text? Certainly if it were our chief duty to bring preaching to perfection as a rhetorical exercise, we should begin by abolishing the tyranny of the text, which, like the lame beggar, demands tribute from us every time we attempt to enter the temple.

2. Yet it must be evident that the advantages of using a text are many and great.

(1) For one thing, it is a cure for desultoriness and rescues the preacher from deserving the sneer of Sterne when he says that the excellency of a certain text is it will suit any sermon, and of a certain sermon that it will suit any text.

(2) Evidently, also, it does insure some reference to Scripture. The preacher starts well, however he may finish. So far he is bound to be, true to his office as a messenger; and when he can find no text for his sermon he does well to ask himself whether the sermon ought to be preached. The "*prologues*" or "*preludes*" in which some preachers now indulge, by the very fact that they range themselves under no inspired texts, confess that they have no authority such as the genuine sermon carries with it.

We may note in passing that if the sermon is to be an expansion and application of a text it seems to follow that the text must be chosen before the sermon is composed.

The late Professor Jowett, of Oxford University, said that it was his habit to write the discourse first, "and then choose a text as a peg." We need not be surprised therefore that he should hold forth in the chapel of his college on the causes of failure in the university from the words "**Much study is a weariness of the flesh**" (Ecclesiastes 12:12).

(3) The use of a text has then the further advantage that it carries to the hearer a sense of authority. Uttering only the brief but terrible "**word of the Lord**," Elijah broke in upon Ahab in his ivory palace at Jezreel (I Kings 17:1); with a text from Isaiah, John the Baptist came preaching the Gospel of repentance (Matthew 3:3); and it was with words dear to many generations of believing hearts that Jesus, in the synagogue of Nazareth, led the way to His sublime announcement, "**This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears**" (Luke 4:21).

(4) Nor is this practice confined to the pulpit.

The old philosophers detaching sentences from the writings of their famous sages, used them as texts; the orator who speaks to a toast and the statesman who previous to his address in the legislature calls for the reading of certain resolutions, both of them use texts; the musician varying the air, but at the same time preserving harmony by observing unity, finds in the motif of his composition his text; to the painter some familiar strain of song or some stirring scene in history furnishes a text; and when Milton opens "*Paradise Lost*" with the words,

Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,

or when Tennyson, in the first lines of "*In Memoriam*," holds it true with another singer that "men may rise on stepping stones of their dead selves to higher things," they only illustrate the use of the text by the greatest of our poets.

In summing up this part of our subject, let me counsel that the use of the text be preserved, although the habit should not be regarded as carrying with it any divine sanction; that where we deem it wise to do so the text may be dispensed with, and a subject announced instead, such as may very likely demand the consideration of not one only but many passages of Scripture; that occasionally the preacher does well to place his text where it seems naturally to belong, and where the old German usage puts it, namely, after the introduction of the sermon has been given; and, above all, that because he conforms to the time-honored practice of having a text, no preacher is warranted in treating it in such a way as to do violence to the context.

The growing feeling at the present time is against that reckless indifference to the whole tenor and spirit of a passage which permits the preacher to make a "*peg*" of his text on which to hang a sermon. However richly his sermon may merit hanging, it deserves to go to its own place in some less honorable
way.

Its Structure

IV. We pass on to consider the structure of the text

1. Not alone our respect for rhetoric, but still more our respect for the Bible, demands that as a rule the text shall form a complete sentence. Verses of Scripture should not be mutilated for the sake of obtaining a striking or sensational text. There was no excuse for South, when having to preach before the Merchant Tailors' Company of the city of London, he announced as his text, "*A remnant shall be saved*" (Romans 9:27); and still less excuse for Dean Hook, when preaching before the young queen of England he founded an argument for submission to ecclesiastical authority on the words, "*Hear the church*." Whately was justly indignant at this priestly trifling.

"By quoting slices of texts you may prove anything. Why should not someone else preach on the text thus, "**If he neglect to hear the church, let him** . . .?"

2. And yet so long as they do no violence to the context, what are called "*fractional texts*" are often impressive. "*The blood of the everlasting covenant*," "*Whose I am*," "*Reconciled to God*," "*Unsearchable riches*," illustrate a legitimate use of Scripture fragments.

The conflict between faith and culture may be discussed from the words, "**Thy sons, O Zion, against thy sons, O Greece**" (Zechariah 9:13); and the contrast between human and divine methods of action may be emphasized by the broken sentence, "**Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine, and** . . . **then that which is worse, but thou** . . ." (John 2:10).

3. The length of the text must be determined <u>by the theme</u>. The main thing is to do full justice to that. A short text often arrests attention, while a long text gives an impression of fullness and authority. We hope that the frivolous fancy for excessively short texts has died out. "*And Bartholomew*," on which a Puritan preacher discoursed with much unction, may be more fruitful on longer acquaintance than it promises to be at first; but a score of sermons by another preacher of the same period and school on the interjection "*Oh*," must frequently have provoked his hearers into using the text themselves in no very gracious spirit; and the preacher who enlarged on the little word "*But*," when he was a candidate for an endowed lectureship, was paid in his own coin when the senior trustee met him as he left the pulpit with the remark:. "You have given us a most ingenious discourse, and we are much obliged to you, but we hardly think you are the man we need."

4. The preacher does well occasionally to draw his text from more than one passage of Scripture.

(1) Texts which corroborate one another are often useful.

- The Second Commandment, "**I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children**," may fairly enough be coupled with the equally authoritative words in Ezekiel, "**The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father**."
- That "**Our God is a consuming fire**," is the other half of the great truth set forth in the more familiar declaration of John, "**God is love**."
- A charge to a young pastor was founded not long since on portions of three verses in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Colossians. "**A minister of Jesus Christ**" (ver. 7), "**A minister of the gospel**" (ver. 23), and "**A minister of the church**" (ver. 25).

These are examples of complementary texts.

(2) Contrasted texts are equally impressive.

- close to one another are the two verses which picture the Gadarenes as beseeching Jesus to depart from them and the people on the other side of the lake as gladly receiving him (Luke 8:37, 40).
- the futile yearning of David, "**O that I had wings like a dove! then would I fly away and be at rest**," is answered by the invitation of David's Lord, "**Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest**" (Psalm 55:6; Matthew 11:28).
- the merciful provision of night here may be set over against the merciful release from it hereafter (Psalm 104:20; Revelation 21:25).

- That "**the sea is his and he made it**," does not take away from the blessedness of the future home where there shall be "**no more sea**" (Psalm 95:5; Revelation 21:5).
- The superior glory of the two dispensations may be suggested by using for a text the last words of the Old and New Testament, "**Lest I come and smite the earth with a curse**," and "**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen**."

(3) While guarding himself against any disposition to ingenious trifling, the preacher may with advantage find his text in the same words as they are used in various connections.

The "**ifs**" of the eleventh chapter of John stand up like the successive peaks of a mountain range (John 11:9, 12, 21, 40).

Mr. Spurgeon preached a searching sermon on the words "**I have sinned**," as they were used by:

- The hardened sinner Pharaoh,
- The double-minded Balaam,
- The insincere King Saul,
- Achan with more remorse than repentance,
- Judas in his agony of despair,
- Job overwhelmed by the righteousness of God, and finally
- The prodigal confessing his unworthiness to his father.

Matthew Wilks, a quaint preacher of a past generation, who often pushed addresses in the pulpit to the verge of audacity, has a good sermon on the word, "**Afterwards**."

- One more plague upon Pharaoh, and afterwards he will let you go;
- For Esau no place of repentance afterwards, when he sought in vain the blessing once rejected;
- The afflictions of to-day must be looked at from the point of view of this word, for "afterwards they yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness";
- Divine guidance in the present, and afterwards glory is the assurance for the believer; while to the impenitent there is solemn warning in the weighty clause "**after death the judgment**."

(4) A good series or succession of sermons may be built up on contrasted or complementary texts.

- "**bear ye one another's burdens**" (Galatians 6:2, 5) may be followed by "**For everyone shall bear his own burden**."
- "**My peace I give unto you**" may suggest the question "**Is it peace?**" and this in its turn the remonstrance, "**What hast thou to do with peace?**" (John 14:27; II Kings 9:17; 9:19).

Finney preached the complete Gospel from three texts,

- "**God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son**" (John 3:16);
- "**How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?**" (Hebrews 2:3) and
- "**But they made light of it**" (Matthew 22 l).

It will be well for the preacher to plan such series as these, in which without formally announcing his intention, he may deal with the various aspects of some important truth.

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