

# **THE MAKING OF THE SERMON**

For the classroom and the study

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE**

### **THE DELIVERY OF THE SERMON – CONTINUED**

#### **SUMMARY**

#### **DEFINITION OF THE TERM “EXTEMPORANEOUS”**

1. Not impromptu preaching.
2. Implies special fitness:
  - (1) Health;
  - (2) Intellectual alertness.
3. Allows some amount of preparation:
  - (1) The subject to be mastered beforehand;
  - (2) Words and even phrases sometimes composed;
  - (3) A preparation of the heart.

#### **II. MERITS OF THE EXTEMPORANEOUS METHOD**

1. It is natural.
2. It is convenient.
3. It is rhetorically excellent.

#### **III. CAUTIONS AND COUNSELS**

1. Must not be adopted under any misconception:
  - (1) That it has the sanction of great names;
  - (2) That it is the easiest method. Beware of mental and moral deterioration.
2. Keep the mind well stored and trained to accuracy.
3. Constantly practice composition.
4. Make careful rhetorical preparation.
5. Discipline yourself in composure.
6. Make good use of your preparation. How?

- (1) Preparation may be entirely mental;
- (2) A brief may be prepared, but not used;
- (3) A brief may be prepared and carried in to the pulpit.

## CONCLUDING SUMMARY

### The Extemporaneous Sermon

THERE is so much confusion as to the meaning of the term “extemporaneous,” and especially as it is applied to sermons, that we must before proceeding any further come to a clear understanding on this point.

I. An extemporaneous sermon may be defined as one in which the preacher knows what he is going to say, but not how he is going to say it (Ath. Coquerel).

In happy moments the words seem to come as if by instinct, but there are other times when the swift intuitions of the instant fail, and it is this uncertainty which makes the sermons of the extemporaneous preacher so uneven (John Foster, *Life and Correspondence*, p. 33).

I. Let it be understood at once that extemporaneous preaching is not the same as impromptu preaching. As to this we need say little, and that little only in condemnation. To the Quaker who told Richard Baxter that he never studied what he said, the reply was, “Then I less marvel at thy nonsense.” Chalmers called such preaching “a mere gurgle of syllables”; and when a lady praised an impromptu preacher to Archbishop Magee, saying, “Oh, what a saint in the pulpit,” his retort was, “And, oh, what a martyr in the pew.”

“My lord,” a clergyman once boasted to his bishop, “when I go up the steps of the pulpit I never know the subject of my sermon”; and the bishop answered him, “No, and I hear that your congregation does not when you come down.”

There may indeed be times when, between us and the discourse which we have prepared, a will higher than our own seems evidently to interpose another message.

In the ministry of Fletcher of Madeley, and in the revival services of C. G. Finney, there came such experiences, and invariably the sequel explained why the change had to be made. But these times will be infrequent.

As a rule the Spirit honors the preacher who devoutly prepares his sermon beforehand.

2. Extemporaneous preaching to be effective implies special fitness.

The speaker should enjoy good physical health and a fine digestion. He should be endowed with intellectual alertness, and a readiness to see and catch points as they present themselves. The famous “Conferences” of Lacordaire were rapidly prepared, but while he worked the intellectual effort was intense.

Dr. A. Alexander used to say that if he had to stake his life on a single effort he would, if familiar with the general subject, abandon himself entirely to the impulse of the moment. The tremendous importance of the issue would brace all his powers to their utmost (Dr. A. Alexander, "*Life*," pp. 84, 87).

The opinion of Dr. Kirk, himself one of the most effective of extemporaneous speakers, is of value; and he says that in order to success the preacher who adopts this method needs a full mind, a glowing heart, and a relentless purpose to secure practical results ("*Life*," p. 42).

3. Extemporaneous preaching allows some amount of preparation.

(1) By previous study the general lines of the subject must have been mastered as completely as though the whole had been written.

The only secret (so Archbishop Magee told his clergy) is to burn the subject into the brain until out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaketh. Daniel Webster opened his large eyes when he was asked about speeches of his which were said to have been delivered on the spur of the moment or at brief notice, and uttered a sentence which deserves to be written in letters of gold: "Young man, there is no such thing as extemporaneous acquisition."

So another orator, Wendell Phillips, counsels, "Think out your subjects carefully. Read all you can relative to them. Fill your mind, and then talk simply and naturally."

And Dr. Joseph Parker, who himself does not read his sermons, says: "There is only one thing I am more afraid of than extemporaneous speaking, and that is, extemporaneous thinking."

(2) Indeed, the preparation may be carried so far that certain words may be chosen and even sentences composed. A theological definition, for example, should never be left at the mercy of extemporaneous selection.

(3) Certainly in no other method of delivery is the preparation of the heart so important.

In a memorable crisis in the debates of the Westminster Assembly the learning of Selden, then the greatest lawyer in England, had been employed to demolish the hopes of the Evangelical party, and apparently he had completely succeeded. Then Samuel Rutherford turned to young Gillespie, the hope of Scottish orthodoxy, and said, "Rise, George man, and defend the church which Christ hath purchased with his own blood." Gillespie did rise, and so powerfully did he speak that when he sat down Selden turned to a friend and said, "That young man has swept away the learning and the labor of ten years of my life." When Gillespie's note book was seized upon by his brethren so that at least the outlines of this triumphant speech might be preserved, all they found were these three words, *Da lucem, Domine*, "Give light, O Lord."

Such critical moments come to all preachers, did they but know it; and at such times it is the heart of Gillespie and not the intellect of Selden that prevails.

## II. What are the merits of the extemporaneous method?

We mention three points in its favor.

### 1. It is natural.

To become artificial and formal in style is the danger of him who writes. The extemporaneous speaker is likely to escape this fault, and to be obedient to Augustine's maxim,

“Let not the preacher become the servant of words;  
rather let words be servants of the speaker.”

The glance of the eye, the free motion of the arms, the gestures with the hand, the poise and play of the whole body – all these help the extemporaneous preacher to make the most of himself.

### 2. Undoubtedly also it is convenient.

Mr. Spurgeon prepared his Sunday morning sermon on Saturday evening, working with great intensity while he worked, and pressing into his service all the resources of a fine library. His evening sermon was prepared on Sunday afternoon. This allowed him time for other work connected with his great church.

### 3. Moreover, it is rhetorically excellent.

Extemporaneous speech is, as Quintilian says, “the crown and radiance of all eloquence.”

The speaker, if in a happy mood, is stimulated to achievements which surprise himself. Masterful moments come to him when he knows himself to be equal to the emergency, when rare and fitting words appear at command, when trains of thought marshal themselves at his bidding, and when the truth glows with the passion of his vigorous conception and burns its way into the hearts of those who listen to him.

When a lady who was a member of Robert Hall's church at Leicester was reading to him her notes of one of his discourses, he interrupted her with the inquiry, “Did I say that, madam? I did not know I had ever said anything so fine.”

“What would I not do or suffer to buy that ability?” wrote Emerson, after listening to a facile extemporaneous speaker. But, then, as Emerson wisely adds, “To each his own.”

We may readily grant that Quintilian's estimate is a true one. Undoubtedly extemporaneous speech is the highest form of address. But let us beware before we adopt it as our own constant practice. The heights to which this method lifts us may usually be very lofty, but the depths to which it sometimes sinks us are well-nigh unfathomable; and too often the level on which we finally settle is nearer to the second extreme than to the first. Dean Farrar is probably correct when he says, “It is certain that not one man in a thousand has the requisite gifts to preach in this manner” (“*Contemporary Review*.” Nov., 1896, p. 621).

### III. Some cautions and counsels will be in place here

1. And first, I would urge the young preacher not to adopt the extemporaneous method under any mistaken conception.

(1) Without question it has the sanction of great names.

But such preachers as Chrysostom and Latimer and Whitefield and Spurgeon do not give us the measure of the ordinary ministry.

(2) Nor should we decide on this method because it is the easiest.

There is a deep meaning in the old phrase, "The duty and discipline of extemporary preaching," and Richard Baxter, among the most conscientious of men, has left us his significant confession: "I use notes as much as any man when I take pains, and as little as any man when I am lazy or busy and have no time to prepare."

"Never begin to preach without notes," says Dr. R. S. Storrs, "with any idea of saving yourselves work by it; if you do, you will fail, and you will richly deserve to fail" (Storrs, *Preaching Without Notes*, p. 38).

The danger of deterioration in the character of his work is greater in the case of the extemporaneous speaker than in the case of any other. Unconsciously to himself he comes to limit his vocabulary to certain words and phrases, and as the years go on he fails to maintain the high standard with which he started. Perhaps unconsciously to himself, he accepts the lower level as the more convenient. There is also great risk that he will fall into habits of exaggeration, and lavish his superlatives on inferior subjects.

Be on your guard, therefore, against fluent mediocrity. With yet greater emphasis we would say, Beware of the moral deterioration which threatens the extemporaneous speaker.

Froude held that men of high sincerity seldom speak well, because they are too careful about truth, and know "how difficult it is to adhere to it in rapid and excited delivery."

Avoid unmeaning expansion and the reckless use of words which neither add new ideas nor emphasize those which have already been expressed. And if you resolve to speak extemporaneously, see to it that the illustrations which you employ are fresh. Keep clear of the stock anecdotes and stories which form the staple of ready-made collections, and of lines of poetry which because they are good for all occasions are therefore not good for any.

2. In order to do full justice to the distinction between saying something and having something to say, it will be necessary for the extemporaneous preacher to keep his mind well stored with facts and to train it to accuracy in the expression of them. Mere readiness can never take the place of these (See Dr. J. W. Alexander, *Thoughts on Preaching*).

“No man could ever speak extempore if everything he said was literally the fruit of the moment.”

If Beecher devoted only a short time to the actual preparation of a discourse, it needs to be remembered about him that he had a wonderfully accurate memory for facts, and that he lived in the atmosphere of sermon making.

Archbishop Magee’s advice to a brother clergyman is much to the point: “Master your subject, rule number one; master yourself, rule number two; put one idea into your sermon, and as many thoughts as you can; and when you have worked that idea out you ought to be able to give your sermon unaided. Unless you can, it is a bad sermon.”

### 3. Constantly practice composition.

Robert Hall, although prevented by his physical infirmity from using his own pen very much, insists that a man will speak well in proportion as he has written much. The reason for this is obvious. It is no easy matter to couple mental exactness to verbal exactness.

In the rush of unprepared speech it is hard to avoid over-statement or under-statement. Always to choose the proper word, and to build it into the sentences in the proper place, is an achievement which baffles even the practiced speaker.

One of John Bright’s most pathetic passages – the peroration of his speech on the Crimean War – trembled at one moment on the verge of bathos because the right word did not immediately occur to him.

A keen observer who frequently listened to Wendell Phillips testifies that with all that orator’s wonderful command of good English, he never heard him make but one speech which was not marred by decided grammatical blunders.

“Nothing that I say in public,” Spurgeon declared, “is fit to be printed as I say it.”

In advising young preachers to learn how to speak without notes, Dr. R. S. Storrs is careful to insist upon writing. “Only careful writing separates, signalizes, infixes the richer and remoter words in the mind. We pass over them as we read. We seek them out with the pen” (“*Preaching Without Notes*,” p. 47).

### 4. Not satisfied with writing in order to enrich and fortify your vocabulary, you must, further, make careful elocutionary preparation.

Not the language which you use, but also the way in which you use it should be considered. Words can no more be separated from speech in preaching than can the shot be separated from the cannon in artillery.

Study the carrying capacity of the vowels; the effect of words as they are spoken; their majesty and melody; their power and pathos; their effect in soothing or stimulating the mind.

Whitefield, it is said, could do what he pleased with an audience with the word “Mesopotamia”; and Robert Hall could never utter the word “tear” without a disposition to weep, which was shared by his hearers.

5. Magee’s insistence that the speaker must master himself, suggests that the speaker must discipline himself in composure and self-possession.

He must accustom himself to meet interruption at all events with outward serenity. Erskine, the most popular advocate of his day, broke down before indifference; and to the lawyer who was associated with him in one case he exclaimed, “Who do you think can get on with that wet blanket of a face of yours before him?” The preacher is happy indeed if his gaze never meets the lack-luster gaze, or the eye which is closed. Let him reflect that the stolid features may conceal deeper feeling than he gives them credit for, and that even though some member of his congregation sleep, perhaps he does well.

A falling handkerchief, a wandering fly, a fainting woman, or the baby, which is not infrequently brought to the front seat by its proud mother, and is apt to cry at any moment, these are among the minor annoyances against which the speaker needs to be proof. Only time and practice can train him to be superior to them; and it must be confessed that in the case of many preachers even time and practice fail to insure him invariable self-possession.

6. As a last point we advise the extemporaneous preacher to make the best possible use of his preparation. Three ways of doing this may be mentioned.

(1) The first is to use no notes at all.

In the dark lanes around Cambridge young Spurgeon practiced his early sermons, on his way to the villages where he was to preach. “I do not mean that I ever repeated a single sentence from memory, but I thought my lesson over while on my legs, and then worked it into my very soul.” The practice of many extemporaneous preachers seems to be summed up in Doctor Hook’s prescription, “To think about what you have to say, and then say it, in as clear and vigorous a way as you can.”

(2) A second plan is to prepare a brief, but not to carry it into the pulpit.

The purpose which it serves in this case is to impress on the mind and preserve in the memory the sequence of thought. Doctor Storrs held this kind of preparation of so much importance that he says: “If needful I would write the plan of the sermon over twenty times before preaching; not copying merely from one piece of paper upon another, but writing it out carefully and fully, each time independently, till I perfectly knew it; till it was fixed absolutely in the mind” (“*Preaching Without Notes*,” pp. 116, 117).

(3) A third plan is not only to prepare a brief, but also to carry it into the pulpit for use.

This was the practice of F. W. Robertson, but he rarely used more written notes than could be penciled upon a small slip of paper. Even this was speedily dispensed with.

“Before ten minutes had gone by it was crushed to uselessness in his grasp, for he knit his fingers together over it, as he knit his words over his thoughts.”

By Bishop Wilberforce the brief was probably used as little. A brother prelate relates that, on one occasion, after hearing the great orator describe the effect on the soul of the clearing away of intellectual doubts, he begged to be allowed to see the passage in the manuscript.

“The bishop put the document into his hand, turned to the page which contained the passage inquired after, and showed him a blank sheet of paper, inscribed with the single word “fog.” He preferred he said to carry this manuscript into the pulpit – it frequently lay on the desk before him upside down – for the benefit of the younger clergy.

“I am afraid of their beginning to preach extempore before they are able to do so with advantage to their hearers” (*Life of Bishop Wilberforce,* p. 371).

But it is safe to surmise that there was another reason. The notes, however brief and however little used, gave him confidence as he spoke. Dr. John Blair Smith, a famous Presbyterian preacher of the last generation, was accustomed to write only a few hints for his sermon on a slip of paper which he invariably placed under the thumb of his left hand. On one occasion, when the little brief slipped off and sailed away to the floor of the middle aisle of the church where he was preaching, he maintained his self-possession, “tore a small piece from a newspaper in his pocket, placed it under his thumb, and went on with his discourse, gathering from it apparently the same inspiration.”

All men are not so happily constituted, and the ordinary preacher who uses a brief or notes will do well to prepare his notes with care; to write them in a clear and legible hand; to see that they are well placed on the open Bible, and not to trust to a chance newspaper for deliverance in case of accident, lest all such expedients prove vain, and his sermon resemble the blank sheet with the one ominous word in Bishop Wilberforce’s manuscript. He will do well too to keep himself from being the slave of any habit which is a help only in seeming to furnish the appearance of it.

We may sum up as to the extemporaneous sermon by saying, that while it has been the method used by some of the greatest of preachers – men who have possessed richness of thought, clearness of intellectual perception, fervor and fullness of expression, and the natural and acquired graces of the true orator – yet it is an exceedingly dangerous method for the majority of preachers, especially for those, and their name is legion, who have more language than thought.

Certainly, of all methods of delivery it is the one which produces the most unequal results. To it belong the most triumphant achievements of the pulpit, and also its most humiliating defeats.

**~ end of chapter 21 ~**

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