

THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

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CHAPTER EIGHT THE THEME (CONTINUED)

SUMMARY

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SERMON

Various methods. The usual way of preparing a sermon.

THE PREPARATION FOR THE PLAN

1. Preliminary points:

- (1) Define "development of the theme";
- (2) The germ found in the first idea;
- (3) The theme grows during the gathering and arrangement of material;
- (4) In what this process consists;
- (5) Notes to be made during the process;
- (6) How the theme unfolds itself;
- (7) Let there be no haste to make a plan.

2. Stages in the development of the theme:

- (1) Examine the text;
- (2) Read the context;
- (3) Compare with parallel passages;
- (4) Read up the literature of the text;
- (5) Avail yourself of illustrative aids.

II. THE PREPARATION OF THE PLAN

1. What has already been done.
2. The plan may now be sketched out.
This should be done with much care.
4. Advantages of a full plan.

CONCLUSION: The plan represents conscientious work in thinking the subject through. It is of more real value than even the writing of the sermon in full.

The Plan and the Theme

When one of our foremost preachers writes to a correspondent that he has really nothing to say about his way of making sermons that could profit others he expresses a truth which the student of homiletics will do well to lay to heart. "Not every monk can walk in Luther's shoes," but the humblest may walk in his own (Dr. Alexander Maclaren).

Every preacher must find by patient continuance and growing experience, what is the best way in which he can prepare for the pulpit. Dr. Guthrie fixed on a text, and then put on paper, "just as they occurred, all thoughts, sentiments, figures, and illustrations that seemed pertinent to the subject in hand." Having provided a store of matter he arranged it under appropriate heads and proceeded to the proper work of composition.

Archbishop Magee never looked about him for suggestions until he had sketched the idea of his sermon. Spurgeon, on the contrary, having fixed upon his text, read widely in the commentaries upon it. Dr. Maclaren knows no method except to think about a text until he has something to say about it, "and then go and say it with as little thought of self as possible."

Beecher was always preparing sermons, but the special subject for the next Sunday was not decided upon until Saturday; and during an hour and a half of undisturbed study on Sunday morning "the vision stood before him, and as hastily as possible he sketched the outline."

The methods pursued by other preachers, and especially by such preachers as these, are of little service to us; but it is safe to say that the following steps mark the development of most sermons.

The text occurs to us in the course of our ordinary reading or during our pastoral work; oftener than not the theme is suggested simultaneously- but as a suggestion only, needing development and definition. These follow as the reward of careful study; and out of them grows the sermon plan. Not until the plan is clearly laid out should the work of composition begin; and when composed, whatever method the preacher adopts, the sermon should be ready for delivery. It will be seen from this analysis of the growth of the sermon that the plan is central; on it converge the lines of preparation, while from it proceed the lines of delivery.

We will now consider the preparation for the plan, and the preparation of the plan.

I. The preparation for the plan:

This consists in a thorough development of the theme or thought in the text which we propose to use.

1. The following preliminary points should be carefully noted.

(1) By the development of the theme we mean the growth of the subject-matter of the sermon as the result of a patient and generous study of the text.

"By continually thinking upon it," was what Sir Isaac Newton answered when he was asked how he discovered the true system of the universe. This is the secret which the preacher also must acquire. Nothing can take the place of earnest original thought.

(2) The germ of this development you will find in your first idea, in that which first suggested the text. Carefully note this, for if it turn out to be the thought of your text you are bound to make it the thought of your sermon also.

(3) The growth of the theme takes place during the process of gathering and arranging your materials.

(4) This process must consist in a thorough analysis of the text and the theme, and of the circumstances which lie about them- what we may call their environment.

(5) Upon a large sheet of paper make your notes, as you are gathering and classifying your materials.

(6) While thus engaged, be on the alert to detect the unfolding of the theme and its logical and orderly arrangement in a plan. Very often this development will also suggest to you the natural transitions from one division of the discourse to the next. The management of his transitions marks the practiced preacher. They are the bridges of discourse, and by them he passes from one point to another, while for lack of them the preacher finds himself trembling on the edge of some great gulf with no means to get across to his next thought. Into that gulf many a hapless sermon plunges and is lost.

(7) Do not be in any haste to make your plan. Let the material accumulate until you have enough and to spare.

"I can always work," said Tennyson, "when I see my subject, though sometimes I spend three-quarters of a year without putting pen to paper." We cannot afford to wait so long as this, but we must learn to make no definite and final plan until we also see our subject.

2. We can now proceed to consider the various stages in the development of the theme.

(1) First, then, examine the text. I analyze each word and phrase of importance; find its meaning and usage, and how it is employed in this precise passage. With more force than elegance Spurgeon used to say, "I like to lie and soak in my text."

(2) Then, secondly, read the context. It may be limited to a few verses, it may be a whole chapter, but in any case take the time necessary to get it in outline before your mind. We need not only textual but also contextual preaching. As Thomas Goodwin, the Puritan, a prince of pulpit exegesis, says, "The context of a Scripture is half its interpretation.

If a man would open a place of Scripture, he should do it rationally; he should go and consider the words before and the words after."

(3) As a third step, compare the text with parallel passages which will often explain, limit, illustrate, and light up your text. A trustworthy Reference Bible, a Scripture text book, and Young's Concordance, will be of service here.

(4) Then fourthly, you will do well to read up the literature of the text, as it may be found in commentaries, in theological and historical works bearing upon it, and in books of travel and research such as will give you local color. Your purpose in doing this is to get into the mind of the sacred writer and think his thoughts after him.

(5) And as a last point, we recommend the preacher to assist the development of his theme by illustrative aids. Note the pictures in the words of the text and context. Here you will find your happiest illustrations. The Interleaved Bible in which you are storing the results of your reading and observation will come into use now. Without falling back on cyclopedias of illustration- which are to the preacher's own collection what the hotel is to the home- you will have at hand a treasure-house of original matter, the only key to which you retain in your own possession.

Such are the processes by which the theme is developed. We need only add that the order here indicated is not arbitrary. In the fervor of discovery, in what Magee calls, when dealing with this subject of the preparation of the sermon, "that most intoxicating of all pleasures, the sense of power," the preacher will often find more than one of these lines opening before him. But he will soon accustom himself to give to each its place; his sheet of paper in the course of two or three hours will be covered with notes; and looming here and there like mountain peaks in the early morning he will see the points of his discourse rising into the sunshine.

The Preparation of the Plan

1. During the process of study which we have been following the preacher has got at the meaning of his text, he has freed it from superfluous matter, formulated his theme distinctly, and prepared the way for a logical and effective sermon plan.

2. All that now remains to be done is to sketch this plan out. Too much attention can hardly be given to this. "Eloquence and manner is the hammer that sends the wedge home, but the *sine qua non* is the disposition of the parts, the shape" (Magee).

3. The plan should be worked over until it is so complete that if necessary it could be preached from without writing the sermon in full. The preacher may take a hint from the novelist. A successful story-teller of our own times would take about three weeks of very close application in composing the plot, and until the whole of this was settled upon not one word of the novel was written.

"Finished writing my plot," we read in George Eliot's journal, "of which I must make several other draughts before I begin to write my book." She aptly says elsewhere, "Construction once done serves as good wheels for progress." "My book is finished," writes Emile Zola, when he has accumulated something like one thousand seven hundred pages of notes; "I have only to write it." As with the novelist so with the preacher.

4. The ease and effectiveness of the written sermon much depends upon careful preparation and a full plan. I have before me as I write two plans by very different preachers, Henry Ward Beecher and Cardinal Manning. The notes in each case are precisely as they left the preacher's hand; indeed both of them were carried into the pulpit and used there. What they have in common is an almost excessive minuteness in the elaboration of the theme.

Beecher's (Genesis 12:1-3) might serve as the table of contents of a volume; Manning's (I John 4:19), which was composed at the age of eighty-three, in fine, rapid handwriting, as the outline for a commentary.

And I instance these two sermons because of the need that there is for insisting upon the importance of a well-studied plan. If the line of study which we have been suggesting be followed, the sermon plan will be sure to represent honest and conscientious work in thinking the subject through. It will illustrate the force of Emerson's remark, "Next to the knowledge of the fact and its law is method, which constitutes the genius and efficiency of all remarkable men."

Remember Bourdaloue's maxim: "I can excuse a bad sermon sooner than a bad plan," and the excellent epigrams of a later preacher:

"Plan intensifies. Assurance of a purpose makes our work solid and consecutive. Plan concentrates energies as a burning-glass does sunbeams. Shiftlessness is only another name for aimlessness. Purpose directs energy, and purpose makes energy. We can because we think we can" (Dr. Parkhurst).

Without instituting an invidious comparison between the two, I believe that the preparation of the plan is of more real value than the writing out of the sermon; and this because the plan represents thought, the composition expression. Who does not envy John Foster when he could truthfully say of his own admirable style, "It is simply and absolutely formed for the thought; is adapted and flexible to it; and is taken out of the whole vocabulary of our language just on purpose for the thoughts and molded to their very shape"?

Manifestly there must be thought worthy of such expression before there can be expression adequate to such thought.

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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