

THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

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CHAPTER TWELVE

PARTS OF THE SERMON (CONTINUED)

SUMMARY

Special care to be bestowed on the Conclusion of the sermon.

I. OF WHAT THE CONCLUSION MAY CONSIST

1. Of recapitulation.
2. Of application.
3. Of appeal.
4. Of rhetorical peroration.
5. Of Scripture.

II. FEATURES WHICH SHOULD DISTINGUISH THE CONCLUSION

1. It should be personal to the hearer.
2. It should apply to the whole sermon.
3. It should not be too long.
4. It should be marked by variety.

CONCLUSION: HOW LONG SHOULD A SERMON BE

1. Ancient custom.
2. Long sermons chiefly post-reformation.
3. The present disposition favors short sermons.
4. Considerations determining the length of the sermon:
 - (1) The audience;
 - (2) The theme;
 - (3) The time of year;
 - (4) The preacher;
 - (5) The method of delivery.

REMEMBER:

- (1) Short sermons are not necessarily brief;
- (2) The more study the shorter sermon;
- (3) Be independent in this matter;
- (4) Yet exercise common sense.

The Conclusion

Of the various parts of the sermon the most pains should be given to the introduction and the conclusion;

- To the introduction because it is the first step that counts.
- To the conclusion because no two congregations being precisely alike in number or in condition of mind, the preacher will have no other opportunity with this audience.

Of these two probably the conclusion is the more important. Therefore we should learn a lesson from Napoleon, and reserve the heaviest battalions for the close.

“The only part of my speech that I prepare,” said John Bright, “is the conclusion. I always know how and when I am going to stop.”

We will consider the various ways of treating this part of the sermon, and the features by which it should be marked.

I. Of what the conclusion may consist.

1. Recapitulation.

This is especially necessary in an argumentative sermon when, as also in a case at law, you go over the various points already dealt with, and review the evidence which you have brought in substantiation of your thesis. In recapitulating, the danger is that you fall into repetition.

All that you should aim to do is to revive recollection. You are now in a position to survey the field, and it is not necessary that you should fight your battle all over again. Vary your language therefore; avoid the phrases which you have previously used; choose your words with great care; pack your sentences closely; and by compression gain cumulative force.

“In your introduction,” a homely Welsh preacher was wont to counsel young preachers, “show the people where you are going, and in your application remind them where you have been.” So Phillips Brooks begins this part of one of his sermons with these words: “Thus, then, I have passed through the ground which I proposed. See where our thought has led us” (Sermon from John 17:3).

2. Application.

There was a time when this was a much more common conclusion than it is now, and often it did extraordinary execution (Dr. W. M. Taylor, “*The Scottish Pulpit*,” p. 108).

But the inevitable danger which threatens any good practice followed. With monotonous iteration the preacher fell into the accustomed formula, and addressed his words first to the regenerated, then to the sinner. Human nature, whether in the one or in the other of these classes, craves variety. From Ennius, the Roman poet, comes the protest which is still needed:

“A little moralizing is good,
a little; I like a taste,
but not a bath of it.”

Robertson, of Irvine, addressing a crowd of children in Glasgow, held their close attention by his stories until his conscience whispered that it was time to point his moral. He had scarcely said, “Now this teaches us . . .”, when a little street urchin in the front bench cried, “Never mind what it teaches. Gie’s another story.” “I learned,” said he, “from that rascal to wrap the moral well in the heart of the story; not to put it as a sting into the tail. For stories are like pictures, and their lesson should be felt, but never obtruded.”

The same holds good as to the applications in a sermon. Always reserve them for the conclusion, and they are almost sure to become stale and pointless by frequent use, to be anticipated in the previous discussion of the subject, and to come when the hearer is forearmed because forewarned and on his guard, or else is too tired to feel the force of your remarks. Far wiser is the preacher who learns how to carry a thread of application through the entire sermon (Dale, “*Yale Lectures on Preaching*,” p. 146).

And yet while this important element in the preacher’s power should not be kept until the close of his discourse, it is equally unfortunate to let the sermon die out with no sort of application, thereby warranting the old whaler’s comment upon his pastor’s effort: “A nice sermon enough, but there was no harpoon in it.”

Daniel Webster protested against the same omission when he said, “When I attend upon the preaching of the Gospel, I wish to have it made a Personal matter, a Personal matter, a Personal Matter.” To borrow Sir Thomas Browne’s quaint phrase, do not “conclude in a moist relentment.”

Do not fail, however, when you are thus bringing home to the hearts of your hearers the truths of the sermon, to distinguish earnestness from vehemence. Some intensely earnest and close applications are calm and sober.

Nathan did not thunder his words of doom at guilty David (II Samuel 12:7), a measured tone carried every syllable of Elijah’s tremendous message home to the ears of Ahab (I Kings 17:1), and the voice which had cried so loudly in the wilderness of Judea sank into quieter but not less impressive tones when, in the dungeon of Macherus, John the Baptist reproved Herod for his crimes (Luke 3:19, 20).

In this reserved force lies much of the power of Jonathon Edwards, “whose doctrine is all application, and his application all doctrine” (Dr. John Duncan).

3. Again, the conclusion may consist of appeal.

I am inclined to think that the only faculty which should certainly be dealt with as the sermon draws to its close is the conscience.

The final chance has now come to the preacher. Alas for him and for his hearers if he merit the crushing condemnation which Dr. J. Duncan, of Edinburgh, passed on an ineffective sermon: "The idea of the preacher is in the sentence after the last."

Be on your guard against concluding with any vague generalities. Never resort to the treasury of platitudes which has always been such a source of weakness to the pulpit. Let the final note be well defined, clear, pointed.

John Wesley was not without warrant in his criticism of the preaching of Robert Hall, "You do not hear the voice which says, **Thou art the man.**" (See II Corinthians 5:20, for a model conclusion).

4. As a fourth way of concluding a sermon, we mention the rhetorical peroration.

Although it is the fashion at the present time to speak of this as though it were a weapon belonging to an extinct method of warfare, I am convinced that it may be used with great effect on certain occasions.

There is no good evidence that it has had its day and ceased to be. The charm which lies in genuine oratory is not for an age but for all time.

Study the perorations of Massillon (E. g., "*Funeral Oration for Louis XIV*"), and the other great French preachers of the seventeenth century, of Robert Hall and Thomas Chalmers, of J. M. Mason, of Henry Melvill, and James Parsons, of York (*Public Speaking and Debate*, by G. J. Holyoake, p. 193), of Morley Punshon, and Dr. John Caird.

Without any ambitious or artificial straining after effect, the peroration should be based on the whole of the sermon, and its impressive, earnest, and cumulative thought may naturally find expression in language more ornate and rhetorical than that which has been previously used.

A most effective conclusion can often be built up from the Bible itself.

Here the preacher has the advantage of language which comes home to the heart with the music of a familiar and dearly loved strain, and to the conscience with the authority of God himself (For examples, see the "*Sermons of William Jay*").

And we may add that whatever has been the nature of his conclusion, he will do well, oftener than not, to close with the words of his text. Make sure that this shall remain as the final impression.

How happily Spurgeon illustrates this in one of his early sermons, from the text, “**Come, see the place where the Lord lay**” (Matthew 28:6).

“Ye timid ones, do not be afraid to approach, for ‘tis no vain thing to remember that timidity buried Christ. Faith would not have given him a funeral at all. Fear buried him. Nicodemus, the night disciple, and Joseph of Arimathea, secretly, for fear of the Jews, went and buried him. Therefore, ye timid ones, ye may go too. Ready-to-halt, poor Fearing, and thou, Mrs. Despondency and Much-afraid, go often there; let it be your favorite haunt, there build a tabernacle, there abide. And often say to your heart when you are in distress and sorrow, ‘**Come, see the place where the Lord lay.**’”

II. What are the chief features which should be found in the conclusion

1. I answer, first, that the conclusion should be personal to the hearer.

It would seem as if while he is speaking the center of interest on the part of the preacher shifts. At first, as is most natural, he deals chiefly with his subject. He is perhaps in closer touch with that than he is with his congregation. But as his discourse proceeds he finds himself increasingly drawn to them. His grasp of his weapon is now so secure that he can watch its effect.

And when the last ten minutes are reached he has come to close quarters and is looking his hearers full in the face. Any sense of distance is fatal here. You cannot land in mid-ocean.

Festus is not on the judgment seat when he cries, “**Paul, thou art beside thyself,**” or Agrippa when he sneers, “**Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.**” These men for the moment feel the touch of him who with no sense of distance lays his fettered hand on their hearts, and concludes, “**I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds**” (Acts 26:29).

2. As a second feature, the conclusion should apply to the whole sermon.

Take care that it is not simply a conclusion of some one part or head of the discourse. Before beginning to compose it, accustom yourself to pause in the preparation of your sermon, and carefully read over what has been already written. Glance through the plan, and see that the conclusion is in line with the entire subject, from the introduction forward.

3. The conclusion should not be too long. Beware of what lawyers call “overlying a case” (Harris, “*On Advocacy*,” p. 159), and remember the important distinction of Robert Hall, “It is one thing to stop; another to finish.” You can stop; but if the sermon be worthy of the name it cannot be finished.

The old Puritans were wont to say - although in this matter they preached better than they practiced - that it was wiser to send the people away longing than loathing; and Hesiod’s famous dictum, “the half is more than the whole,” has, I think, an unintended bearing on our present point.

Learn to leave well alone, and to cease firing when your ammunition is gone. Congregations know blank cartridges, and they are not afraid of them. As you value your reputation for truthfulness and fair play do not announce that you mean to conclude and then fail to keep your promise. Do not say, “Finally . . . In conclusion . . . One word more . . . And now before we part-
-.” This is to recall Pope’s ode, only in no seraphic mood,

Trembling, hoping, lingering, flying;
Oh, the pain, the bliss of dying!

Why should your sermon be like Charles II, “such an unconscionable time in dying”?

The consummation devoutly to be wished can best be reached by having one clearly defined conclusion and no more. Your hearers will soon come to recognize when this is reached, and they are not unreasonable if they resent another turn in the wilderness when Canaan has been brought so near.

A French preacher takes his seat for the moment with a congregation tortured by false hopes and illusive promises; and thus he pictures their feelings: “And now there are signs of the end. On the horizon we see the gray dawn of something that might be an application or conclusion. Alas! we are wrong. The end is not yet. There is another and another. The unhappy man is searching for a good closing sentence, and cannot find one.”

Notwithstanding what has been said as to care in the preparation of this part of the sermon, we should add that there is no part which the preacher will, if he be master of himself, of his subject, and of his audience, hold more loosely. In the course of your conclusion, are you strongly impressed with the conviction that the moment has come for you to stop? Then stop. As Luther puts it: “When thou seest thy hearers most attentive, then conclude, for so they will come again more cheerfully the next time.”

4. As a fourth feature, the conclusion should be marked by variety.

Let the character of your sermon decide the character of your conclusion.

- In practical sermons, deal more largely with motives;
- In historical sermons, draw effective lessons;
- In sermons which are largely argumentative, sum up conclusions.

Plainly, there can be no one uniform rule as to this. The schools of rhetoric formerly decreed that the conclusion should be divided into inferences, applications, and lessons. When the preacher said, “From this consideration of our subject, we infer . . .” the congregation knew that the moon of his conclusion was in her first quarter.

Our freer modes of treatment have rebelled against this prescribed allotment of the parting words, and now it is rather by our increasing directness and earnestness that our hearers perceive that this stage has been reached.

As a general thing the preacher does well to let it be known, even in so many words, if necessary, that he is about to conclude his discourse. And we counsel also that it is wise occasionally to break the tyranny of custom by concluding in a novel way.

- What you are in the habit of doing, refrain from doing.
- Instead of an appeal, put a question. Leave the application to the hearer's conscience.
- A sudden silence, broken only by a few parting words of prayer, may arrest attention where a train of reflections would fail to gain a hearing.

Perhaps Paul's departing from Athens stimulated inquiry. It was when the Jews sought Jesus at the feast and found him not that multitudes began discussing who and what he was (I John 7:12).

The question is sometimes asked, "How long should a sermon be?"

The answer has varied with the centuries.

- The Latin Fathers usually occupied half an hour, although often they limited themselves to ten minutes.
- The Greek Fathers, as we might expect from a comparison of the languages in which the sermons were preached, were longer.

The fashion for long sermons came in after the Reformation.

Charles II was willing to listen to Baxter for two hours. The delivery of one of his massive sermons occupied Charnock not less than three hours and a half.

At the planting of the First Church, Woburn, Mass., the discourse lasted four or five hours; this seeming to be the point beyond which taking any accurate account of time was futile.

The present disposition is to demand short sermons.

At a bookseller's shop in London John Henry Newman saw sermons labeled: "*Warranted orthodox, not preached before, and - 20 minutes.*"

"Twenty minutes with a leaning to mercy" was the pithy way in which an English judge answered our question. Even Mr. Spurgeon considered forty minutes sufficient for a discourse, and he himself rarely exceeded that time. Abbé Mullois says; "The harangues of Napoleon only lasted a few minutes, yet they electrified whole armies. In fifteen weeks, with a sermon of seven minutes every Sunday, one might give a complete course of religious instruction if the sermons were well digested beforehand."

So short a time as ten minutes would not suffice for the preacher who had not to harangue, as did Napoleon, nor simply to exhort or declaim, as is the practice of many Romish preachers; but rather to explain, instruct, and apply.

A true sermon cannot be limited as a brief, impassioned harangue can.

The length of the sermon must depend:

- Upon the character of the subject to be discussed,
- Upon what measure the congregation has been accustomed to,
- Upon the preacher himself, and even
- Upon such minor considerations as the seasons of year or the time of the day in which it is delivered.

It may also be added that a sermon which is extemporaneous can be at least five minutes longer than a sermon which is read from a manuscript. But in any case, as Luther says, "Know when to stop."

Leave something for next time. Exhaust neither your theme nor your audience.

Close at a point short of that reached by the Spanish proverb: "We have still to skin the tail."

Yet I would have the young preacher who cultivates brevity reflect that short sermons are not necessarily lively. One can be very dull in a quarter of an hour.

An English bishop after hearing one of his clergy preach, remarked: "Your sermon was very short, sir."

"Yes, my lord, I thought it better to be brief than tedious."

"Oh, but you were tedious."

As a rule the more study you put into your sermon the shorter, because the more compact will it be. What Pascal wittily says of one of his "*Provincial Letters*" holds true here also: "I would have made it shorter if I could have kept it longer."

You will soon find yourself preaching for about the same time every Sunday without needing to refer to your watch, and if on any occasion you exceed it, you may be assured of hearing of that sermon before long from some time-serving member of your congregation.

~ end of chapter 12 ~

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