

THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

T. Harwood Pattison

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE DELIVERY OF THE SERMON

SUMMARY

I. IMPORTANT THAT THE PREACHER SHOULD TAKE AN INDEPENDENT POSITION

1. The question is constantly recurring.
2. Delivery has much to do with effectiveness.
3. Yet it is not the prime essential.

II. CONSIDERATIONS WHICH MAY ASSIST THE PREACHER TO DECIDE WHICH METHOD OF DELIVERY TO ADOPT

1. Temperament and constitution.
2. Intellectual characteristics.
3. The audience to be addressed.

III. ESSENTIALS, WHICHEVER METHOD IS ADOPTED

1. Thorough preparation.
2. Suitable pulpit manner:
 - (1) Be wide awake and alert;
 - (2) Be natural;
 - (3) Be in sympathy with your subject and audience:
 - (a) In spirit;
 - (b) In voice;
 - (4) Be reverent;
 - (5) Be self-possessed.

In General

I. It is of the first importance that every young preacher should take an independent position and settle it with himself in what way he can best deliver his sermon.

1. The fact that this question is one which constantly recurs, refusing to be silenced by the sweeping assertions of the advocates of this or that method, or to be settled by the prevailing custom of hour or place or church, may be taken as at any rate conclusive evidence that no one way is so evidently the best that any alternative to it is not to be considered.

Over against the emphatic and comprehensive counsel of one of our great preachers, "Burn all your manuscripts and never write any more to be read in public," we may set the opinion of another who while holding that the free man is the man of most power to impress and persuade, is yet persuaded that "so long as men differ in aptitude and temperament so long ought there to be room for variety in method."

2. No one will question that the way in which a sermon is delivered has very much to do with its effectiveness.

Was not St. Francis de Sales right in saying, "You may utter volumes, and if you do not utter them well it is lost labor. Speak but little and that well, and you may effect much"?

John Foster was extremely fastidious in his choice of words and in the structure of his sentences; and no man of his generation was his superior in originality of thought. He insisted that the effect of the sermon should depend upon these things alone. Delivery he professed to despise. Consequently he failed as a preacher.

Who can wonder, indeed, when we learn from William Jay that his delivery all through was in a low and equable voice, with a kind of surly tone and frequent repetition of a word at the beginning of a sentence. He had a little fierceness occasionally in his eye, otherwise his face was set and his arms perfectly motionless?

The wit spoke not for one preacher but for many when he observed, on hearing that the sermons of a popular orator were to be published, "They ought to print the preacher, for the principal merit of his sermons is his delivery."

Many a good sermon is wrecked on the reef of a poor delivery; and many a very ordinary sermon is saved by learning to avoid it. As the best laws are said to be those which are best administered, so we are tempted to think that the best sermons are those which are best delivered. With preaching (so Doctor Guthrie put it), it is as with firing a gun, the manner is the powder, the matter is the shot; and it is well-known that a tallow candle with a sufficient quantity of powder will go through a deal board that a leaden bullet would not pierce fired off with a feeble charge.

3. And yet we would not convey the impression that the method of delivery employed is by any means the prime essential to successful preaching. No, the method is secondary to the matter; as both method and matter are secondary to the man. However he may preach, the true man, if he has a message from God, will make himself heard. The man; the matter; the method; this is the right order.

II. In deciding which method of delivery you will adopt, there are many things to be considered

There may be good reasons why in certain cases some one is quite clearly the best.

1. Much will depend, for instance, upon temperament and constitution.

“The lowest quality of the art of oratory,” it has been said, “and yet on many occasions of the first importance, is a certain robust and radiant physical health; great volumes of animal heat. In the cold thinness of a morning audience, mere energy and mellowness is inestimable; wisdom and learning would be harsh and unwelcome compared with a substantial man, who is quite house-warming” (G. J. Holyoake).

2. Then again, the intellectual characteristics of a preacher may be such as to decide him in his choice of a method of delivery.

The man whose mind is lacking in order and arrangement should certainly avoid the shallows of a purely extemporaneous habit; and, on the other hand, he whose mind is naturally precise and logical may well learn how to speak without a manuscript.

3. To some extent, also, the character of the audience to be addressed must be taken into account.

A congregation used to extemporaneous speed. may fret under the trammels of paper; a congregation accustomed to hear the sermon read may not at once estimate at its true worth the sermon which, while conscientiously prepared beforehand, is preached without notes.

III. We may settle it at once that whichever method of delivery a preacher takes as his own, there are certain essentials which ought always to distinguish his sermon work.

1. First among these we mention thorough preparation.

With more or less of fullness the whole service should be rehearsed in anticipation of public worship. The sermon itself should be so completely mastered that just as in a good equestrian statue man and horse are one, so the preacher and his discourse are inseparable. The sermon has become a part of himself.

There has been no readier preacher in our century than Bishop Wilberforce, and yet in his diary more than once occurs the entry, “Very nervous because sermon was unprepared.” Such nervousness may be a means of grace to the preacher who is tempted to rely on that treacherous stimulus which is known as “the spur of the moment.”

2. Further, we must insist upon suitable pulpit manner.

(1) Be fully alive, wide awake, and alert. Pay just so much attention to health as will ensure your forgetting all about it.

(2) Use and practice should teach you to be perfectly natural, and to keep clear of any suspicion of ministerial professionalism.

Insincerity of voice and affectation in manner carry their own punishment. An audience grows weary of them and of him who stoops to employ them.

“I have sometimes thought,” Emerson once said, “that in order to be a good minister it was necessary to leave the ministry. The profession is antiquated. In an altered age we worship in the dead forms of our forefathers.”

(3) To be in sympathy alike with your subject and your audience is another essential.

It was because Whitefield felt the future in the present that he preached as he did. His sermons owed so much to his personality that as we have them reported they fail to explain the immense effect which they produced on his hearers.

Remember South’s noble words: “In this great work the trembling hand is still the steadiest; and the fearful heart the most likely to be victorious.”

Eloquence is logic touched by emotion, and therefore feeling is to the full as necessary as thought. His sermon was likely to be effective when Thomas Fuller could lay it at the feet of his Master and say: “I have steeped this in tears, Lord: I once offered it dry; now I offer it wet.”

Fletcher, of Madeley, the saint of early Methodism, while preaching seemed to one who listened to him an angel in human form rather than a mortal man dwelling in a house of clay.

A plain countryman going to hear Robert Murray McCheyne found himself sorely affected even before the preacher opened his lips.

When John Summerfield, the young Methodist preacher who died on the threshold of his earthly ministry, became animated, “it seemed as if the very breathings of the Spirit were upon him.”

It is impossible to estimate to highly the power of a sympathy which draws its strength not from transient emotion so much as from the minister’s conviction that in public worship he stands in the pulpit in behalf of Christ to beseech men to be reconciled to God. The spirit as much as the words of such a preacher, his manner as much as his message, carries a subduing power.

What Vinet said of another, and what was eminently true of himself, is what we should all desire to have true of ourselves, “His manner of preaching did more than confute doubts, it absorbed them.”

Nor, in dealing with this subject of pulpit manner, should we omit all mention of minor matters, inferior indeed in importance to this power of sympathy, and yet well worthy of our consideration.

The preacher's manner should be appropriate. It should be in keeping with the particular part of the service which he is conducting. Avoid the monotony of tone which makes you uniformly employ the same key, whether in announcing a hymn, reading the Bible, engaging in prayer, or delivering the sermon. Do not give notice of a Sunday-school picnic with the same impressiveness of manner and emphasis with which you invite the congregation to pray. Even in preaching it is to be remembered that each subject of which you treat must have its appropriate manner, tone, and spirit.

“Always,” is Spurgeon's counsel to his students, “suit your voice to your matter, and above all, in everything be natural.” To the same effect he says elsewhere: “Vary the tone of your voice often; be like the weather, have sun, sleet, rain, then dry up; anything but fog.”

(4) If you are in sympathy with your theme and with your hearers this will ensure another essential to which I will refer: I mean reverence.

As we have seen, the first impression which the minister makes may affect the influence which he exerts on his congregation in higher matters, and almost decide not his fate alone - which is of less consequence - but the fate of his message. The secular air is scarcely less offensive than is the opposite extreme of sanctimoniousness. In our resolve to avoid the one we should be on our guard lest we fall into the other. Our protest against sacerdotalism, ritual, and superstition must not be suffered to weaken the reasonable and seemly reverence with which we should perform our work.

The church is a building set apart for sacred uses; the pulpit is not a secular platform; the Bible is like no other book; and worship is a peculiar act.

The observed of all observers, the minister needs to pay some attention to such secondary matters as the expression of his countenance, the posture which he assumes in repose, and his guarded behavior while conducting the service.

Garrick, who whispered to his companion when they were hearing Whitefield, “I'd give all the money of a benefit-night could I handle my handkerchief as that fellow does,” once criticized a clergyman who had none of Whitefield's grace of manner after this practical fashion:

“What particular business had you to do,” he inquired of the offending minister, “when the duty was over?”

“None,” said the other.

“I thought you had, on seeing you enter the reading desk in such a hurry. Nothing can be more indecent than to see a clergyman set about sacred business as if he were a tradesman, and go into church as if he wanted to get out of it as soon as possible. What books were those which you had before you?”

“Only the Bible and Prayer Book.”

“‘Only the Bible and Prayer Book.’ Why you tossed them backward and forward, turned the leaves as carelessly as if they were those of a day-book and ledger.”

Charles Dickens in his description of a sermon to which he listened in a theatre in the East End of London says, that while nothing could be better than the large Christianity of the preacher’s general tone, yet it did some violence to his own spirit of reverence “to see the Bible held out at arm’s length at frequent intervals, and soundingly slapped like a slow lot at a sale.”

Such criticisms as these are valuable because they help us to see ourselves as others see us, and because they give expression to the feelings of many in our congregations who nevertheless submit to offenses against good taste and even reverence without remonstrance. They are convinced of the sincerity of their pastor and are benefited by his ministrations, but did they care to speak they might in all frankness employ Caesar’s words about Mark Antony:

I do not much
Dislike the matter, but the manner of his speech.

(5) It may be well to add that in the delivery of the sermon the preacher should aim to be self-possessed and calm.

In the early part of his discourse he may occasionally pause with advantage. It is the practiced speaker who understands and employs the eloquence of the pause; in our first efforts we very likely dread the silence which may be felt, and fear lest to ourselves and to others it may suggest that it is the speechlessness of exhaustion rather than of self-command. It is still uncertain whether Doctor Chalmers employed his usual urbanity when he said to a young preacher: “I like your sermon; you will make a good preacher; the pauses especially were magnificent.”

However this may have been, there can be no question that whether his speaking rate be slow or rapid, whether he drive his sentences with tireless speed from the first to the final word, or checks his rhetoric now and again to give his hearers time to rest and reflect, the preacher should never lose that measure of self-possession which is essential to effective speech.

In the passages which are concerned only with calm statement, in those parts which are devoted to tracing the logical sequence of a train of thought, and even when climbing to the height of his great argument, he reasons of righteousness and judgment to come, the pulpit orator should aim to resemble the river -

Though deep, yet clear; though gentle, yet not dull;
Strong without rage; without o’erflowing, full.

~ end of chapter 19 ~

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