

THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

T. Harwood Pattison

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE TREATMENT OF THE TEXT

SUMMARY

Preliminary Notes

How sermons may be divided - Three classes.

1. Topical
2. Textual
3. Expository

THE TOPICAL SERMON

I. THE DEFINITION

1. The origin of topical sermons.
2. The distinction between the topical and the textual sermon.

II. ADVANTAGES OF THE TOPICAL METHOD

1. Rhetorical perfection.
2. Allows of a thorough examination of the theme.
3. Trains the mind to breadth of view.

III. DEFECTS OF THE TOPICAL METHOD

1. Tends to a neglect of the Word of God.
2. Has not been so useful as textual preaching.
3. Is in danger of becoming monotonous.

IV. HOW TO TREAT A SERMON TOPICALLY

1. Its style rhetorical
2. Its arrangement decided by the subject with which it deals.

- (1) Progressive when the theme is argumentative or historical;
- (2) Exhaustive if one distinct thought is to be elaborated.

The Topical Sermon

We proceed now to inquire how a text may best be treated. The answer to this will furnish us with a convenient classification for our sermons. If the text has been chosen honestly, and not at the bidding of caprice or in neglect of that reverence with which we should handle the Word of God, it will naturally suggest the theme of our discourse. Sermons, therefore, may conveniently be classified according to the precise way in which the text is treated, and the precise subject which the preacher proposes to discuss. Such an arrangement places the sermon under one of three classes.

These are:

- the topical sermon, in which the theme is especially prominent;
- the textual sermon, in which more regard is paid to the words of the text; and
- the expository sermon, in which, as a rule, a longer portion of the Bible is taken as the basis for the discourse.

Before we proceed to consider these three classes more in detail, we may remark that which method of treatment is adopted by the preacher in the case of any special text will probably be decided by the text itself, by the theme of the sermon, by its occasion, and by the preacher's mental constitution.

1. Some texts can only be treated topically, while others naturally cleave asunder at the touch of verbal analysis, and others again admit almost as well one method of treatment as another. A proverb furnishes a topic rather than a text; such a verse as, "**Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ**" (Titus 2:13), may best be analyzed word for word; while the solemn unanswered question, "**How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?**" (Hebrews 2:3) is equally adapted to either the textual or topical treatment.

2. The theme of the discourse must also be considered.

A grand and exalted theme demands corresponding handling. "Men that usually talk of a noun and a verb" must abandon either their text or their method here. Such a sentence as, "**Great and marvelous are thy works, Lord God Almighty**" (Revelation 15:3), had better be considered topically. But the one thing to guard against is uniformity of treatment. Variety is the spice of sermons as well as of life.

3. It is evident also that the occasion on which the sermon is preached may have much to do with the way in which the text is used.

While careful verbal analysis may best serve our purpose in the ordinary course of our ministry, there will come special times when a topical treatment is to be preferred.

The missionary sermon, the sermon at an ordination, and the sermon for great national observances, such as Thanksgiving Day, are likely to be of this order (See R. W. Dale's "Sermons on Special Occasions.").

Nor need the preacher be altogether indifferent to his own mental constitution. Personal preference is by no means a prime consideration, but neither is it to be entirely set aside. It is likely that the mind which is naturally analytical will be most at home in the textual method, and it is certain that the rhetorician will almost instinctively prefer the broader generalizations of the topical treatment.

Let us now consider the topical sermon.

I. A topical sermon we define as one which is founded on the theme or topic of the text rather than on the words of the text.

1. Here let us make two observations.

The first concerns the origin of topical preaching. As we have already seen, the apostles often preached without texts, in this differing from their immediate successors, who having no sense of direct personal inspiration found in the words of the Scriptures their chief source of authority. Gradually, however, the text became corrupt, and so its power as a court of final appeal diminished.

The mischievous fashion for allegorizing made it seem unnatural, and, in consequence of being often torn from its context and misapplied, it forfeited that sense of reality which should have been one main source of its strength. So the use of a text fell into not undeserved contempt. Often Chrysostom and Augustine and others of the Fathers, took no text.

In course of time the best preaching came to be either expository or topical, and in either case it was independent of a single text. Here, then, is one valuable purpose served by the topical method of preaching. It is a wholesome protest against mere verbal quibbling, and against the unscholarly and often superstitious use of words.

2. Our second observation deals with the distinction between the topical and the textual sermon.

Both have this much in common, that they are founded on some truth of Scripture. But they differ in that the topical sermon formulates the truth in the words of the preacher, the textual rather in the words of the Bible. The question whether or not the choice of the theme precedes the choice of the text, is probably answered here.

As a rule, in the topical sermon, the theme is first selected and then search is made for a text to fit it, as the trunk is packed before the direction is written; while in the textual sermon the theme is evolved from a careful analysis of the text, although the preacher has already a tolerably clear idea of what his theme will be.

II. What are the advantages of the topical method of discussing a theme?

1. The first advantage is rhetorical perfection.

Thus treated the sermon approaches nearest to a complete rhetorical effort. If the aim of preaching be to make the sermon a work of art, then let the theme be discussed on the topical basis. In the history of preaching the enthusiasm of the rhetorician has often conquered the conscience of the messenger, and what are called “great sermons” are the fruit of that perilous victory. South and Bourdaloue, Robert Hall and Thomas Chalmers preached topically because they were men in whose nature the orator was predominant.

2. It must be evident also that this method allows a thorough examination of any one theme.

A single text rarely does this if it be too closely adhered to. Jonathan Edwards excelled in the discussion of a doctrine in all its various aspects; but his traditional reverence for having a text prevented him from dispensing with it altogether. There were many occasions when in order to bring it over to his side he used its words in defiance of the simplest principles of exegesis. We may avoid this error, and yet find a text to suit our purpose, from which, without going into any analysis of its words, - although to them we are careful to do no violence, - we may discuss some great doctrine of our faith or some great crisis in our history.

3. As a further advantage of topical preaching, we notice that it trains the mind to breadth the view.

Mere verbal preaching dishonors religion fully as much as does the substitution of human opinions for divine declarations. Preaching ought to open up generous and far-reaching prospects, to fill the mind with great conceptions of truth, and to excite and animate the spiritual nature. Not the bare words, but the spirit of the words is what we should aim to bring into the light.

The mind is stimulated at once when Robert Hall proposes to discuss “*Modern Infidelity, Considered with Respect to its Influence on Society*” (Ephesians 2:12), or when Canon Liddon invites us to study “*The Idea of Religion*” (Psalm 143:8).

Chalmers and Mozley and Philips Brooks are preachers who excel in this art of rousing and engaging the intellect by the announcement of a theme worthy of its concentrated attention.

III. It must be granted, however, that the defects of the topical treatment in a sermon are serious.

Of all methods it seems open to the gravest objections. Some of these we proceed to mention.

In the first place, the topical treatment of a text leads to a neglect of the Word of God. The text is chosen as a motto, and after having been once announced it is often forgotten altogether, or if not this, it is not continuously referred to, and has no vital connection with the sermon.

At best it is the tribute which the preacher pays to custom, and is regarded with no more affection than is any other tax.

The sermon follows the text as Peter followed his Master - afar off. Almost better would it be if, like the other disciples, it had at once forsaken it and fled.

Attention is from the outset diverted from the Scriptures to the preacher. It is for his opinions we listen, when we ought to hear only what God the Lord will speak. Topical preaching by neglecting the Bible in the pulpit has led to its neglect in the pews. Why should the hearer open a book to which he is never once referred?

To topical preaching is also due that style of sermon which is no sermon, not a "word," or message, or familiar discourse; but instead of these a treatise or essay.

"Metaphysical not Scriptural," said Dr. J. A. Alexander, after listening to a sermon of this sort; "clear, logical, acute, ingenious, heartless, orthodox . . . thankful I do not sit under the best of such preaching; I should starve" ("Life," Vol. I., p. 460).

From the well-known words of Jesus about true freedom (John 8:31-36), Dr. Channing proposes "to maintain that the highest interest of communities as well as individuals is a spiritual interest; that outward and earthly goods are of little worth but as bearing on the mind, and tending to its liberation, strength, and glory." This grand theme leads to a discussion entirely worthy of it; but was either the theme or the discussion in the thought of Jesus when he uttered his memorable words?

2. Judged by its fruits topical preaching has not been so useful as that which has confined itself rather to an exposition of the words of Scripture.

It has fostered a false conception of the purpose of preaching, and by diverting attention from the message to the messenger has too often dishonored the Spirit, and shorn the sermon of its strength. Revivals of religion have been marked by an increased reverence for the precise words of God, while the great masters of topical preaching have sometimes mourned that their sermons so rarely led to conversions.

The reason for this is obvious.

- the preacher has been tempted to preach about the text rather than to open up its very message;
- he has given his own views instead of seeking to know the mind of the Spirit;
- he has been interested in his theme more than in his hearers - forgetting that the sermon was made for man, not man for the sermon - and as a consequence of covering too much ground he has failed to come down to particularize his congregation, and to make close personal application to the individual conscience and heart.

3. Nor can it be denied that topical preaching has done much to hamper the freedom of the sermon, and to rob it of variety and freshness.

The number of topics is after all limited, and he who has preached upon any one topic will not wish to return to it for some time. He may have what Chalmers called his “long-hand sermons,” sermons, that is, in which he discusses some doctrine or duty in elaborate detail, but the intervals between such sermons are often a dead level of pulpit commonplace, trying the patience of his hearers and tolerated only for the sake of the occasional mountain peak which rises from the monotonous plain.

Chalmers, to whom reference has just been made, preached in every large town of Great Britain; but yet his sermons were surprisingly few. He was a master of that rare art which can throw into a discourse, even when preached for the fortieth time, a passion born at the moment of its first delivery. But such men, like the elaborate discourses of the ordinary topical preacher, are few and far between.

IV. A few words may be added as to the best way in which to treat the topical sermon

1. The style will naturally be rhetorical.

Formed on the model of the oration this kind of sermon will often rise to successive climaxes, and close with a well-defined peroration. At the same time, however, attention must be paid to the element of argument, which should be found in every sermon, and especially in this. Logic should never be sacrificed to rhetoric. The preacher in his theme sets out with a proposition, and he is bound to see to it that this proposition is proved, at all events to his own satisfaction. Nor should any bewitchment of oratory deprive the sermon of plain direct application. Without this the preacher does little more than fire blank cartridges; he invites us to a field day rather than challenges us to a conflict.

2. The arrangement of the topical sermon will naturally be decided by the subject with which it deals.

(1) If the preacher is handling a theme which is argumentative or historical, his treatment should be progressive. Let point after point be indicated, reached, and reviewed.

Thus it was that Bishop Butler in his “*Fifteen Sermons*” discussed Human Nature (See also “*Sermons*,” by Dr. E. G. Robinson, 1896); and thus also Henry Melvill advanced from one stage to another in the argument demanded by his subject, after he had whetted his hearers’ appetites by a clear preliminary statement. The plan of campaign was first announced, and then faithfully pursued to the culmination in victory.

(2) If, on the other hand, the preacher confines himself to the elaboration of one distinct thought, his method will be to state and restate that thought exhaustively. Every separate facet of the gem will be held up to the light. Here lay the excellence of Chalmers’ great sermons. “*The expulsive power of a new affection*” (I John 2:15), for instance, was considered in every conceivable way. It provoked Robert Hall’s caustic criticism that as with the door on its hinges there was here only movement without progress; but to this it might be sufficient answer to say that neither the door nor the sermon was intended to advance.

The city was faithfully compassed and in due time before the continuous circuit the walls fell down. The rams' horns had not been blown in vain (See also the sermons of Archer Butler, T. H. Newman, and Phillips Brooks).

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