

# THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN RHETORICAL ELEMENTS IN THE SERMON-CONTINUED

### SUMMARY

#### IV. HOW TO ACQUIRE SKILL IN ARGUMENT

1. Recognize the value of a logical mind.
2. Study your own mental constitution.
3. Maintain throughout your ministry argumentative studies.
4. In your composition, aim at clear expression.

#### V. COUNSELS AS TO THE EMPLOYMENT OF ARGUMENT IN THE SERMON

1. Never argue for argument's sake:
  - (1) Tempted by self-conceit;
  - (2) Proving what is not disputed;
  - (3) Arguing upon matters of little moment.
2. Do not readily engage in controversy at the beginning of your ministry.
3. Recognize the necessary limitations of argument.
4. Respect the honorable limits of pulpit controversy.
5. Acquaint yourself with the subject on which you propose to argue.
6. If led into controversy, preserve the character of a Christian gentleman.
7. Avoid unnecessary controversy with brother ministers, and other Christian denominations.
8. Mingle rhetoric and logic.
9. Let Scripture remain your final appeal.

#### Argument (Continued)

#### IV. We may here say something as to acquiring skill in argument. How best can that be done!

1. First then, let the preacher recognize how valuable to him in his ministry is a logical mind. Lacking this, preachers have brought not themselves alone, but also their vocation into contempt. Their minds are what Coleridge termed "non-sequacious," and their hearers soon learn to distrust their conclusions. For it is beyond question that men delight in argument.

The acutest minds in the country followed the long trains of thought with which C. G. Finney held his great audiences spell-bound. An orator of no mean order in our own time has said in counseling young speakers: "Always bear in mind that an audience is most interested when you appeal to its intelligence.

The great fault of public speakers nowadays is an attempt to be oratorical. Rhetoric and imagery are simply the ornaments of oratory; argument is its substance" (Mr. Bourke Cockran).

2. In order to make your sermons logically effective, it will be well that you study your own mental constitution. If you have a natural aptitude for logical processes be on your guard against becoming too hard and unsympathetic in your method of address.

If, as many speakers do, you possess what I may call the logical instinct, you will certainly have one faculty in common with your hearers. They may be fully capable of coming to sound conclusion although at the same time entirely ignorant of the laws of processes and reasoning (Dr. Howard Crosby, "*Yale Lectures on Preaching*," p. 69).

The large proportion of preachers, and often among them very good speakers too, are not so much logical as rhetorical. They love to speak, and the temptation to cover up a defective line of argument with the flowers of oratory, declaiming when they ought to demonstrate, is strong within them.

Selden's advice is excellent: "First in your sermon use your logic and then your rhetoric. Rhetoric without logic is like leaves and blossoms without fruit" (W. Mathews, "*The Great Conversers*," p. 23).

Remember, then, that assertion is not proof. "He who establishes his argument by noise and command," says Montaigne, "shows that reason is weak," and General von Moltke, in his "*Memoirs*," remarks that "The pulpit zealot who tries to persuade where he cannot convince, empties the church with his sermons."

3. Throughout your ministry it will be well that you maintain argumentative studies.

Analyze, for example, the arguments of the New Testament (E. g., Romans).

Keep well informed on current theological controversies. Take with you on your summer vacation the book which is at the time creating discussion among thinking men, and spend an hour or two every day in carefully reading and summarizing its contents. Where possible attend the courts of law, and study the various ways of putting a point so as to carry the jury.

Seek to profit by the friendship of able lawyers (F. W. Robertson, "*Life and Letters*," Letter 138).

It cost Abraham Lincoln a long struggle to understand what constitutes proof; and in order to master the principles of reasoning he left the law office where he was reading, and through a cheerless winter spelled out his geometry by the light of pitch-pine knots in his father's log hut.

“Then in the spring, when I had got through with it, I said to myself one day, ‘Ah do you know now when a thing is proved? ‘ And I answered right out loud, ‘Yes, sir, I do.’ ‘Then you may go back to the law shop.’ And I went.

4. Practice composition with a special view to cultivating clearness of expression. Think an argument through, and then put it in precise language.

Vast harm is done in the pulpit by loose and inaccurate rhetoric. Analyze the elements of your own sermon. Face the question, What do my hearers think that I mean? and be not like “jesting Pilate who waited not for the answer.” Bishop Wilberforce was chagrined when a poor countryman came to him in the churchyard, after he had preached a sermon demonstrating as he thought most conclusively the existence of God, with the assurance that “for all the bishop had said yet he did believe after all that there was a God.”

The cynical usher of the church in Oxford where the Bampton Lectures, designed “to confirm and establish the Christian Faith,” are delivered, was once heard to say, “I have heard the Bampton Lectures for thirty years; and, thank God, I am a Christian still” (See Duke of Argyll, “*What is Truth?*” p. 16).

**V. We conclude by offering some counsels as to the employment of argument in the sermon”** (See “*Life of A. P. Stanley, D. D.,*” Vol. II., p. 135).

1. Our first counsel is, never argue for argument’s sake.

(1) This is done when our conceit of our reasoning powers tempts us to put our points in a controversial way.

There are preachers who know how to raise a blister but are utterly ignorant as how to heal it. To a friend with whom he found himself disputing without any promise of good coming from it, Dr. Johnson said: “Come, we do not want to get the better of one another; we want to increase one another’s ideas.”

Pascal anticipated Johnson in making this point when he wrote: “It is the argument that delights us and not the victory. We love to watch the conflict of opinion; but the plain truth we do not care to look at” (Tulloch’s “*Life of Pascal,*” p. 172).

How happily in his terse way Spurgeon hits the mark: “It is never worthwhile to make rents in a garment for the sake of mending them, nor to create doubts in order to show how cleverly we can quiet them.”

(2) We are guilty of making the same mistake when we labor to prove what is not disputed.

Our congregations are not infidel clubs. The truths of the Christian religion are generally accepted by them. What we need to do is to show how indispensable these truths are; not so much that they are so, as that they must be so.

It is to be questioned whether as much good as harm has been done by fencing matches between believers and atheists; but certainly the ordinary church service is no place in which to practice our weapons. It is eminently unwise to introduce into the pulpit controversial books or to give prominence to the names of freethinkers. Let them do their own advertising at their own expense.

Your duty is not so much to preach down error as it is to preach up truth.

(3) Nor are we warranted in the limited time which is afforded us, in arguing upon matters which are of little or no importance.

“What can be more hopeless,” writes Henry Rogers “than the attempt to engage the attention and interest the feelings of a common audience in methodical subtleties?” (*Essays* Vol. II., p. 226).

“Dry and dreary to us who asked for the celestial manna,” is Longfellow’s comment in his “Journal” after listening to “a most logical discourse.”

George Eliot drew from the life when she depicted the Sunday service in Shepperton Church:

The sermon was an extremely argumentative one on the Incarnation, which as it was preached to a congregation not one of whom had any doubt of that doctrine and to whom the Socinian’s theories confuted were as unknown as the Arimaspians, was exceedingly well adapted to trouble and confuse the Shepperton mind.

Lowell has given sound advice which is unhappily not yet unnecessary in his homely couplet:

It is surely better to preach to the living,  
Than keeping a worrying them old Jews.

2. At the beginning of your ministry do not readily engage in controversy. Be constructive rather than destructive.

Drawing his image from the fashionable sport of his day, an old Puritan says: “Controversies require sharpness of wit, and some cunning to find out Satan’s sophistries Young cockerels that begin but to crow may not set upon the great cocks of the game.”

Besides, to preach positive truth will give a tone of authoritativeness to your sermons, and will very largely determine the cast of all your homiletical work.

“Eloquence,” Pascal says admirably, “should prevail by gentle suasion, not by constraint. It should reign, not tyrannize” (Tulloch’s *Pascal*, p. 109).

As a fact very few preachers can argue well, and very few hearers are converted by controversy. The spirit which is generated is not the spirit in which the truth loves to find a lodgment.

3. By all means recognize the necessary limitations of argument.

Are there not truths of the first moment in our religion which are incapable of proof to the unregenerate hearer? Spiritual things are only spiritually discerned. Argument may flatter the vanity of an unconverted man, and leave his conscience untouched.

“Good logic may remove difficulties which impede belief in sincere souls, but faith has its roots in a moral temper, and the absence of this temper reduces the most cogent arguments to silence” (*Life of E. B. Pusey*, by H. P. Liddon Vol. I., p. 147).

Your first duty is to deliver our message, to proclaim the love of God in Christ and to press it home on the acceptance of our hearers.

4. We add (as having a close bearing on the last counsel), respect the honorable limits of pulpit controversy.

Is there not too much reason for Voltaire’s sneer at “pulpit Christianity preached six feet above contradiction”? Have we not known preachers who have been guilty of degrading the throne of Christian oratory into a coward’s castle, “from which a man surrounded by his friends, in the absence of his opponents, secure of applause and safe from a reply, denounces those who differ from him”? (F. W. Robertson).

We do no injustice to our vocation when we assert that too often the preacher under these circumstances has recalled Hazlitt’s description of Coleridge, “An excellent talker, very- if you let him start from no premise and come to no conclusion.”

Lord Wensleydale, who spoke as a lawyer, was right when he said to an English clergyman:

“Orators of your profession always have two great advantages: they have the court with them, and the other side is not heard.”

The preacher lays himself open to a suspicion of unfairness, and is even guilty of a certain measure of moral cowardice, who is in the habit of setting up an imaginary foe which indeed is often cast like Aaron’s calf entirely in his own furnace, and demolishing it for the benefit of his hearers.

To a curate who had been guilty of doing this, his rector said as they came back from church, “Very good, Mr. Jones; but next time, get a better infidel.”

These conventional skeptics and atheists are only the puppets of the controversial rostrum - they have had their day and should cease to be. As a rule they never were anything but dummies, and it is time that they were banished from the pulpit of every intelligent and fair-minded preacher.

5. This counsel suggests another.

Thoroughly acquaint yourself with the subject upon which you propose to argue.

Archbishop Magee, referring to the teacher whose influence most powerfully affected him in his college days, says: "He first taught me how to think; before I met him I only knew how to argue" ("Quarterly Review," January, 1897. p. 407).

Thought, which implies reading and research, must lie back of all argument worthy of the name.

Consider how long it takes a lawyer to get up his case, and how many and various are the sources to which he turns for his information. No lawyer would dare venture into court to argue on a question involving a poisonous drug or a mechanical invention so ill-informed on the technicalities of his subject as is many a preacher when he rises in his pulpit to demolish what he ignorantly brands as "science."

When Lord Coleridge said that "it is rare to find a man who understands clearly the point for which he is contending, and rarer still to find one who keeps to it if he does," he spoke as a man who had from his youth been a hearer of sermons as well as a hearer of cases-at-law.

There is no longer any excuse for a preacher's ignorance of science, and we trust that the day has forever passed in which a man with any pretence to intelligence will attack from his pulpit what is now recognized as one of the foremost allies of our Christian religion.

As for the man who rushes into a controversy for which he has neither natural aptitude nor acquired equipment, it may be sufficient to advise him to lay to heart the advice "not to raise the devil unless you can lay him."

6. Is it necessary to add, as another counsel, that if you are led into controversy you must be careful to preserve the character of a Christian gentleman?

Controversy necessarily involves a trial of temper, and we need to be on our guard against that polemical spirit which is "its own judge and its own executioner" (Bishop Lightfoot).

"You cannot," as Carlyle says, "pull the shirt off a man - the skin off a man, in a way that will please him."

But you may make the operation as painless as possible, and certainly the surgeon should himself be calm. The rhetorical nature is naturally excitable, and for this reason you had better never engage in controversy unless you have complete control over your own temper.

When a discussion into which he had been drawn became unusually heated, Robert Hall suddenly closed the debate and retired to a distant corner of the room, where he was overheard praying, "Lamb of God! Lamb of God! calm my perturbed spirit."

This was the wise course to pursue, even though to adopt it imperiled his reputation for controversial skill.

The serene Addison has left us his opinion on this point:

“Nothing can be more unjust or ridiculous than to be angry with another because he is not of your opinion . . . You cannot make a more false step or give your antagonist a greater advantage over you than by falling into a passion.”

7. I may add, as pertinent to this point, the further counsel, Avoid most jealously unnecessary controversy with brother ministers or with other Christian denominations.

Whitefield writes to Wesley that “he has learned a lesson from the attacks of Luther on the Zwinglians and others, who in all probability equally loved the Lord Jesus, notwithstanding they might differ from him in other points.”

“By the blessing of God,” he adds - not without a suspicion of combativeness in his own tone - “provoke me to it as much as you please, I do not think ever to enter the lists of controversy with you on the points wherein we differ.”

More praiseworthy still is the determination of Philip Henry: “I am resolved to spend my strength on those things in which all spiritual Christians are agreed”; and we can all sympathize with gentle Archbishop Leighton as he sighs from the midst of fierce doctrinal controversies: “Oh, what are the things we seek to differ about, compared with the deep things of God?”

What has been said must not be taken as depreciating an intelligent maintenance and setting forth of the distinctive principles which separate between the Christian churches. It may be well that these be treated occasionally in our ordinary pulpit ministration; and there is no reason why they should not be handled in such a spirit as to command the respect and win the admiration of those who may nevertheless differ from our own conclusions.

8. Such sermons must not be confined to a formal logical statement, an extreme which is scarcely less to be commended than the opposite disposition to indulge in rhetorical flights when calm reasoning is called for.

Our hearers love illustrations, they appreciate a careful and telling choice of words; they enjoy the rise and fall of rhetorical discourse. Logic alone can never hold an audience; but how much a congregation values the careful commingling of logic and rhetoric may be seen in the deep and powerful impression made on his hearers by Canon Liddon.

9. As a last counsel we would say, Let Scripture remain your final appeal.

Treat its declarations as dogmatic and authoritative. It is not with opinions or speculations that the Bible deals. It “declares,” from the keynote in the first verse of Genesis to the final words of Revelation. You will do well to distinguish between what the Scriptures themselves say, and all human interpretations of their utterances, and comments on them.

“It is a mistake to which many good Christian people are sorely tempted in this day, to assert such a connection between the eternal Gospel and our deductions from the principles of that Gospel as that the refutation of the one must be the refutation of the other” (Dr. Alex. Maclaren).

Be very careful in appealing to Scripture to do so intelligently and honestly. Remember Whately's distinction: "A desire to have Scripture on our side is one thing; a desire to be on the side of Scripture is quite another."

Never encourage the impression on the part of your hearers that the Bible is on its trial, and that you are retained for its defense. No; as one preacher shrewdly puts it: "You are not in the pulpit to defend the Bible; the Bible is in the pulpit to defend you."

The apologetic and only half-believing tone of the eighteenth century sermons really bred the skepticism which they aimed to remove.

How wise was Dr. Johnson's answer to a friend who urged that truth should bear examination: "Yes, sir, but it is painful to be forced to defend it. Consider, sir, how should you like, though conscious of your innocence, to be tried before a jury for a capital crime once a week!"

Our true policy is to assume the truths of Scripture. The burden of proof rests not with us, but with those who deny them. Surely it is fair at this age of the world to appeal to the testimony of the nineteen centuries and more of Christian history; to the years crowded with incidents, during which the Bible has held its own in the great centers of thought and action; and to the intellectual acuteness and moral nobleness of those who have believed in it.

**~ end of chapter 16 ~**

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