

THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

T. Harwood Pattison

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

PARTS OF THE SERMON (CONTINUED)

SUMMARY

The natural cleavage of texts. The chief purpose of the Introduction.

THE ADVANTAGES OF HAVING DIVISIONS IN THE SERMON

1. To the preacher.

(1) They hold him down to the sermon model:

(2) They assist him in composing the sermon;

(a) Evidence consecutive thought;

(b) Train him to think consecutively;

(3) They assist him in delivering the sermon:

(a) Make it an articulated whole;

(b) Aid emphasis;

(c) And make transition easy.

2. To the hearer.

(1) Excite interest;

(2) Assist the mind,

(3) Produce the right effect.

II. THE RIGHT TREATMENT OF DIVISIONS.

1. Should divisions be apparent throughout the sermon?

2. Should divisions be announced?

3. At what time should divisions be announced?

III. AS TO THE NUMBER OF THE DIVISIONS.

1. Uniformity unreasonable.
2. Have as few divisions as possible.
3. The present fashion is for three main divisions.

IV. QUALITIES WHICH SHOULD BE FOUND IN DIVISIONS

1. Interesting.

- (1) Study freshness;
- (2) But be true to the meaning of the text;
- (3) Eccentricity not justified. Clear.

3. Progressive.

4. Symmetrical;

- (1) There must be proportion in the parts; Should be related to one another in the progress of thought;
- (2) Should bear a due proportion to one another;
- (3) Should bear recapitulation.

The Divisions

EVERY text on which a sermon can be preached has a natural cleavage. There are certain points at which it can best be split open, and divided naturally.

These points of cleavage are what we have in mind when we speak of the partition or division of the sermon. The introduction serves its chief purpose when it leads up to the cleavage of the text, and suggests the lines of analysis which are to be followed.

I. Before proceeding further let us glance at the advantages alike to preacher and hearer in having divisions in the sermon.

1. To the preacher the first advantage is that divisions hold him down to the sermon model.

- (1) They save him from committing the rhetorical blunder of writing an essay: and calling it a sermon.

All effective speakers use divisions, although they may not be formally announced, or be even apparent on the surface. Archdeacon Paley, who has no superior in the art of writing clear English, says what every hearer of sermons knows to be true: "A discourse which rejects these aids to perspicuity will turn out a bewildered rhapsody, without aim or effect, order or conclusion."

(2) Another advantage to the preacher in having divisions in his sermon is that they assist him in composing his discourse.

- (a) They are evidences of consecutive thought. They do not so much belong to the art of expression as to the art of thinking. They are philosophical rather than rhetorical.
- (b) This statement can be reversed and still remain true. Divisions train the preacher to think consecutively. For this reason an imperfect or faulty development of the text almost certainly means an imperfect or faulty development of the theme.

I venture to press this two-fold statement to its logical conclusion, and to assert that a sermon which fails under analysis cannot be a good sermon. By something akin to that providence which is said to watch over intemperate persons and children, it may do good; but in itself it is not good.

We may illustrate what we mean from the art of painting. "A painter," says Mulready, who was himself an artist, "cannot take a step without anatomy." The greatest masters of figure painting, such as Michael Angelo and Leonardo da Vinci, studied anatomy as diligently as though they had intended to become surgeons. Their figures were first drawn in the nude and then draped. And so a sermon must be built up, the skeleton first, then flesh and the clothing.

(3) Further, divisions help the preacher when he comes to deliver his sermon.

(a) Thanks to them, it is impressed upon his mind as an articulated organism.

Whatever his plans of delivery may be, he should be master of the contents of his discourse. This is where divisions are so helpful. They insure method, and "without method memory is useless."

(b) They also help him in emphasizing his thought.

To lay stress where it is not called for is like putting your foot down on level ground when you expected to find a descent. The whole system is shaken when it should have been sustained. There are levels in sermons - often, alas, the level is unbroken and then it is a dead level - but in the best of sermons there are smooth and even passages where the mind rests. Why emphasize them? Nothing is more tiresome, nothing less impressive, than perpetual intensity.

(c) And, moreover, to mention another important point in their favor to the preacher, divisions assist him in his transitions from one point to the next.

They are rungs in his ladder, and if at any period in the delivery of his discourse he finds his memory fail, falter, or refuse to do its work, he must at his leisure examine the plan just there. Most likely a rung is missing and the angels of thought, who wear no wings for the preacher, but tread the common rhetorical stairway, cannot pass up or down.

2. What advantages to the hearer are served by divisions?

(1) Contrary to a belief which has become very general in consequence of clumsy sermonizing, I believe that divisions excite interest in the minds of our hearers. They foster expectation, like a catalogue of fine paintings over which you run your eye before entering the gallery.

(2) Certainly they assist the mind to understand and carry away the particular line of thought which the preacher is enforcing. Even though it is true that at times they seem to break the force of an address, yet “if they are conjunctive and not disjunctive, they aid the memory without materially weakening the effects of the sermon at the time” (J. A. James, “*Life*,” p. 477).

You must consider how many of your hearers are unused to logical thought. Assist them to follow your message, and you have gone a long way toward assisting them to accept it.

(3) Besides, the clear and natural partition of your subject is likely to produce the precise effect aimed at in your sermon.

Every discourse which deserves the name must have an aim, and the divisions assist the preacher in taking his sight as a skillful marksman should do. This point - and this - and this, are they all in line? - then the discharge is likely to hit the mark.

I commend to every preacher a little bit of noble English in which John Bright contrasts his oratory with that of W. E. Gladstone. “Gladstone goes coasting along turning up every creek and exploring it to its source before he can proceed on his way; but I have no talent for detail. I hold my course from headland to headland through the great seas.” Divisions are the headlands by which the speaker holds his course through the great seas of thought.

II. We pass on to consider the right treatment of divisions. Here there are three questions to be asked and answered

1. First, should the divisions be made apparent throughout the sermon?

Certainly they should. If you are treating your subject logically and progressively, it is surely right that any intelligent hearer should be told just where he is. Why should he not know the plan of a discourse as he knows the plan of a house? He does not mistake the parlor for the dining room. Why should he mistake the first division for the third? Each should have its own furniture. Nor need the sermon become rigid or mechanical because the arrangement is evident.

“The divisions of a church,” says Mr. Ruskin, “are much like the divisions of a sermon; they are always right so long as they are necessary to edification, and always wrong when they are thrust upon the attention as divisions only.”

Phillips Brooks preached what he practiced when he declared that “the true way to get rid of the boniness of a sermon is not by leaving out the skeleton, but by clothing it with flesh.”

2. Second, should the divisions be announced?

Why not? The custom has the authority of long usage. It comes to us from the Roman forum, and from the masters of eloquence who mentally associating the heads of a speech with certain localities around them, spoke of “the first place,” “second place,” and so coined a phrase which has become universal (Phelps, “*Theory*,” etc., pp. 370, 371).

To this day the political speaker on the stump and the advocate at the bar announce their points. Yet so radical are the differences between sermons that this question has to be decided mainly by the species to which each discourse belongs.

In a topical sermon divisions need not be announced, and indeed there may be none; the topic in bulk is constantly held in view.

In a textual sermon the words of the text, taken in their logical order, will generally furnish all the help that the hearer's memory needs without formal announcement.

In a textual-topical sermon, on the contrary, the divisions should always be announced; and in an inferential sermon they should be indicated clearly as each advanced position is taken.

In an expository sermon the words of the Scripture on which the exposition is based will of necessity be repeated at the critical points in the discourse, and this will serve the purposes of formal announcement.

3. Thirdly, if announced, at what time should this be done?

I answer, have no fixed and invariable method. Sometimes announce the divisions immediately after the introduction; at other times - and this perhaps most frequently - content yourself with announcing the divisions when you come to them. Vary the custom, again, by first giving the division and then in one brief sentence characterizing its contents (R. W. Dale, "*Yale Lectures*," pp. 140, 142); or, once more, by announcing the thought of the division at its beginning and at its close.

But while we counsel announcement of divisions we caution the young preacher against pushing announcement any further. Never announce your sub-divisions. This is to court arithmetical confusion, and perhaps provoke unkindly feeling on the part of your hearers when they discover that they have been beguiled into thinking the end to be in sight although it was yet afar off. A congregation is almost invariably disappointed when it mistakes a way station for the terminus.

III. Something must be said at this point as to the number of the divisions in the sermon

1. Uniformity in this matter is unreasonable.

There can be no settled and arbitrary rule. The number of divisions in any discourse must evidently be determined by the species to which the sermon belongs and by the subject of which the sermon treats.

The very fact that the preacher has to prepare so many discourses a week for so many months in the year, and for so many years of a pastorate, is apt to betray him into the hands of a dull inert uniformity, unless he is constantly on his guard. And perhaps this is why it will be found that almost every preacher has a favorite number of divisions, short of which his mind never stops, and beyond which his mind never goes.

2. As a rule, we should say, let the divisions be as few as possible.

Mr. Spurgeon said that he always had most divisions when he had least to divide. This is a confession which we little look for in him, but it is undoubtedly seemly from most preachers. The poor preacher like the poor family has often more mouths than meat.

“I guess good housekeeping,” says old Thomas Fuller, “not by the number of chimneys, but by the smoke.”

In preaching, as in architecture, the main lines on which the eye rests at once should be few. Impression is marred by multiplication. The taste at the present time is for two or three divisions, but it has not always been so. The Puritans delighted in the intricacies and involutions of the maze. Thomas Lye, discoursing on I Corinthians 6:17, endeavors to explain the text “in thirty particulars for the fixing of it on a right basis, and then adds fifty-six more to explain the subject” (*Morning Exercises*, Vol. V., Nichol’s edition).

With a modesty which touches the sublime and an obscurity which comes equally near to the ridiculous he proceeds: “Having thus beaten up and leveled our way to the text, I shall not stand to shred the words into any unnecessary parts, but shall extract out of them such an observation as I conceive strikes a full eighth of the mind of the Spirit of God.”

3. The prevalent fashion is for three main divisions.

(1) For the preference for this number one reason was found by the mediaeval church in the three persons of the Trinity;

(2) but it is far more likely that it is due to convenience.

The three-fold division of most subjects insures sufficient thoroughness of treatment, and yet escapes tediousness. The preacher readily remembers three points, the hearer as readily carries them away in his mind. The division into three is applicable to many texts.

How better for instance can you treat the words of Pharaoh’s daughter to the mother of Moses (Exodus 2:9), “**Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages,**” than by considering in their order the nurse, the child, and the wages? But, on the other hand, it will often be found that while further analysis would reduce the number to two, the preacher is so wedded to his rule of three that he refuses to part with it.

A sermon on the familiar text, “**I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ**” (Romans 1:16), is happily divided into “First, what Paul thought was the Gospel,” and “Secondly, what Paul thought the Gospel was.”

Why then add (as the preacher does), “Thirdly, what Paul felt about the Gospel”? Is not this point really the conclusion? Does it not furnish a rare opportunity for personal appeal in closing the discourse?

Indeed, two divisions have been sufficient for some of the ablest preachers (Bossuet, Fenelon, F. W. Robertson), and where a third has been added it is often capable of ready demonstration that it might better be treated as a conclusion simply. Before it is reached the preacher oftener than not has spent his force. To tack so near port when there is just wind enough to carry the ship in, is to prolong the voyage to no purpose.

IV. We will now enumerate some qualities which should be found in the divisions of discourse.

1. Endeavor then, first, to make your divisions interesting. Monotony of divisions, whether in the number or in the wording of them, is to be avoided.

(1) Study freshness in this matter.

How admirable, for example, is the treatment of Paul's familiar injunction "**Be careful for nothing**" (Philippians 4:6, 7), which announces as a theme "*Paul's Sure Cure for Care,*" and for division:

I. A Precept.

II. A Prescription.

III. A Promise" (H. L. Wayland, D. D.).

"*Beelzebub Driving and Drowning his Hogs*" is how John Burgess an earlier preacher, words his theme, and the expectation which this arouses is not disappointed by what follows: "In these words the devil verified three old English proverbs; which as they contain the general drift of my text (Matthew 8:10-32) shall also contain the substance of this ensuing discourse:

I. The devil will play at small game rather than none at all ('**All the devils besought him, saying, Send us into the swine**').

II. They run fast whom the devil drives ('**When the unclean spirits entered into the swine the whole herd ran violently**').

III. The devil brings his hogs to a fine market ('**Behold the whole herd ran down a steep place into the sea**')," etc.

(2) Yet remember that freshness of divisions must not be gained at the expense of the true meaning of the text.

The German pastor of the last century who preached from the words, "**But the very hairs of your head are all numbered**" (Matthew 10:30), violated this rule when he prepared to speak:

I. Of our hair.

II. Of the right use of the human hair.

III. Of the memories, admonitions, warnings, and consolation that have come from the human hair.

IV. Of how hair can be used in a Christian way (Hurst, "History of Rationalism," p. 70)."

And certainly the Puritan carried his advocacy of Calvinism into a strange court when he treated the words, "**So Mephibosheth dwelt in Jerusalem; for he did eat continually at the king's table; and was lame on both his feet**" (II Samuel 9:13), in this original way:

- I. "My brethren, we are here taught the doctrine of human depravity: '**Mephibosheth was lame.**'"
- II. Also the doctrine of total depravity: He was '**lame on both his feet.**'"
- III. Also the doctrine of justification: '**He dwelt in Jerusalem.**'"
- IV. The doctrine of adoption: '**He did eat at the king's table.**'"
- V. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints: 'He did eat at the king's table continually.'

(3) A desire for freshness of division, again, does not justify the eccentricity which often borders so close on irreverence.

That pregnant wit and excellent divine, Thomas Fuller, seems to exceed his commission as a preacher of truth and soberness when, discoursing on the text, "**Thou wilt make all his bed in his sickness**" (Psalm 41:3), he dwells with most emphasis on the word "**all,**" and details on the pillow, the bolster, the head, the feet, the sides, and so on: "**All his bed.**"

2. That the divisions of a discourse should be clear is our next point.

The meaning of each division ought to be made so evident when it is announced that it needs no further explanation. To explain a division is to define a definition. Here it is well to recall Daniel Webster's answer when he was asked how he obtained his clear ideas. He replied, "By attention to definitions."

Spend much time, therefore, in simplifying the form in which divisions are cast, and the English in which they are expressed. Such a text as "**God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth**" (John 4:24), is sublime in its suggestion of mystery, but what can justify the obscurity of this division of it in a recent discourse?

"The text naturally divides itself into three parts:

First, we have presented to us the transcendental properties of the divine nature.

Second, we have the anthropomorphic relations under which those transcendental properties in the divine nature stand revealed and become apprehensible.

Third, we have the appropriate symbolism by which those anthropomorphic relations and illustrations of the transcendental properties in the divine nature constitute worship."

Divisions which are quickly understood and readily remembered are the best. At a distance of several years an intelligent layman recalled a sermon which he had heard from a popular preacher on the fall of Samson, "**The Philistines took him, and put out his eyes,**" (Judges 16:21), by its main points; which are indeed admirable in the perfection of their religious application: "*The Blinding, Binding, and Grinding Effect of Sin.*"

When John McNeill, preaching from the words, “**He said unto Simon, Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught**” (Luke 5:4), announces as his divisions, “**Launching Out, Letting Down, and Leaving All,**” he makes sure that anyhow his hearers will remember the leading lines of his sermon.

You may be certain that any confusion in divisions in your sermon, and any difficulty in keeping the thoughts expressed in them in their right places, must be traced to a lack of clearness. You have not attended to your fences, and the sheep are straying from one pasture to another. The remedy for this is not to run after each sheep that wanders, but to repair and strengthen your fences.

These discursive thoughts - wandering stars in your firmament owe their existence to your failure to observe Webster’s principle to pay a great deal of attention to definition.

3. The divisions of a discourse should not only be interesting and clear, they should also be progressive.

Are there times when in composing or in delivering your sermon you find it difficult to pass without a dislocating jar from one division to another? In all probability this arises from imperfect partition. Some link in your plan of thought is either lacking or superfluous.

Observe it therefore as a law in homiletics that divisions should be logical and practical. They must be in their right place in the discourse, and they must serve the true end of the discourse. There is a peculiar pleasure with which hearers follow preachers who scale and conquer successive peaks in a chain of thought. It is equivalent to the joy of conquest with which we trace the victorious progress of a military campaign.

We may illustrate this by a story. It is said that a young student for the ministry, whose father was one of the chaplains at the court of the Prince of Orange in the last century, was suddenly called upon to preach before the prince, who had heard marvelous stories of his skill. With scarcely any notice he was pushed into the pulpit, and in the presence of the courtly and noble audience announced as his text, the narrative of the eunuch who desired Philip to come up into the chariot and enlighten him as to the meaning of the Scripture which he was reading (Acts 8:27-38).

The young preacher found, he said, four wonders in this passage, which he would make the four heads of his sermon:

- I. Wonder the first, A courtier reads.
- II. Wonder the second, A courtier reads the Bible.
- III. Wonder the third, A courtier owns himself ignorant of his subject.
- IV. Wonder the fourth, A courtier applies to a minister of Christ for information, listens to his instruction, and follows his counsel.

Here the sense of progress is a delight to almost any hearer - with the possible exception of the prince who provoked it.

Robert Hall, who was a master of logical precision, from the words “**Beloved, now are we the sons of God**” (1 John 3:2), deduces these three progressive points:

- I. The felicity of the future world is very imperfectly known (“**It doth not yet appear,**” etc.).
- II. But the period is coming when it will be known (“**When he shall appear**”).
- III. The effect of this will be a perfect knowledge of Christ, and a conformity to him (“**When he shall appear, we,**” etc.).

And a preacher of our own time illustrates this same excellence of progress in thought when he divides the text, “**While ye have the light, believe in the light; that ye may become the children of light**” (George Adam Smith, D. D., on John 12:36) into “Our Day, Our Duty, and Our Destiny.”

4. Interesting, clear, and progressive divisions should also be symmetrical. There must be proportion in the various parts.

Three rules will assist us here.

(1) Divisions should be related to one another in the progress of thought.

If the sermon is to remain in the mind, whether of preacher or of hearer, each division should be so formed as to suggest the one which follows. This will be insured if you have taken your thought from the text and followed the logical sequence of ideas. You will think the thought of the passage after it.

Spurgeon preaching on the cure of the man sick of the palsy (Mark 2:4) divides his sermon happily until he reaches his last point:

- I. Four men anxious about one.
- II. A man who went in through a roof and came out at the door.
- III. A man going in on a bed and coming out with the bed on him.
- IV. Somebody grumbled.

The mind is so satisfied with the quaint arrangement of the three points, that there is a sense of surprise not wholly grateful when a fourth is added.

(2) Divisions should bear a due proportion the one to the other.

Even the generous latitude of a camp-meeting rebels against the preacher who thus opened up a sermon on the sublime words, “**Lo, these are parts of his ways; but the thunder of his power who can understand?**” (Job 26:14).

“In discoursing upon this passage I shall, in the first place, review the chapter and show what is meant by the word ‘**these.**’ I shall, in the second place, mention some of the works of God. I shall, in the third place, conclude according to circumstances, light and liberty being given.”

It is hard to see from what quarter either light or liberty could come to such a preacher as this.

(3) Divisions should bear recapitulation.

If at the close of your sermon you cannot readily recall the divisions, and if they do not naturally succeed one another, you may be sure that they are faulty. It is not your memory that is to be blamed. That will do its work if furnished with the proper material.

Adolphe Monod, who had all the Frenchman's clearness and compactness alike in his thought and his expression, has a sermon on "*The tears of Paul*" (Acts 20:31), in which he draws a parallel between them and those which his Master shed.

As you read his points you will see at once how easily they can be retained in the memory.

"Paul shed tears of suffering and pain; tears of pastoral solicitude; tears of natural affection and friendship. Herein is the servant in holy parallelism with his Master; for three times it is recorded of Jesus that he wept: tears at Gethsemane, tears over Jerusalem, tears at the grave of Lazarus. Paul's ministry, like his Master's, was a ministry of tears."

One word in conclusion.

In this important matter of divisions do not yield at once to passing fashions or transient fancies or groundless prejudice.

The great masters of pulpit eloquence in our own century, and especially those who have revolutionized our methods of preaching - such men as F. W. Robertson, Alex. Maclaren, and C. H. Spurgeon, have with scarcely an exception used divisions, and even announced them in a formal manner.

The disposition to make everything subordinate to rhetoric will perhaps tempt you to resent a distinct and clearly announced partition of your subject. The temptation to indolence and insufficient preparation will possibly beguile you into making a talk and mistaking it - if your foolish mind be sufficiently darkened - for a sermon.

The sermon is no more a display of rhetorical skill than it is a string of disconnected platitudes.

In contrast with these, it should be a careful and intelligent exposition and enforcement of the passage which you have chosen for your text. If order be Heaven's first law, then why shall not our sermons by the clearness and conclusiveness of their logical advance justify our claim to hold our credentials from the skies?

~ end of chapter 11 ~

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