

THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

T. Harwood Pattison

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE PREACHER AND HIS HEARER

SUMMARY

Eloquent hearing as necessary as eloquent speaking.

I. IMPORTANCE OF OBTAINING SUCH A HEARING

1. This is possible. Illustrations from the History of Preaching.
2. It is essential to our doing our best work.
3. Yet there are hindrances to effectual hearing:
 - (1) A natural repugnance to religion;
 - (2) Natural inattention of most hearers;
 - (3) An indisposition to think consecutively;
 - (4) The hearer's lack of previous information as to the subject of the discourse;
 - (5) A poor sermon or a prejudice against the preacher.

II. HOW SUCH A HEARING MAY BE OBTAINED

1. By attention to the preparation of the sermon. Prepare it with the audience in view:

- (1) In the choice of a theme;
- (2) In the composition of the sermon:

First, interest.

- (a) Do not create a feeling of distaste;
- (b) Aim to interest all classes;

Second, instruct;

Third, convince;

Fourth, inspire.

2. By attention to the delivery of the sermon:

- (1) It should be suitable to the occasion;
- (2) It should be sympathetic;
- (3) It should be earnest.

Conclusion

UP to this time we have been chiefly interested in the preacher and his sermon. Before we close our discussion it will be well that something should be said as to the third essential to a successful presentation of truth, I mean the congregation.

Eloquent hearing is needed to-day no less than eloquent hearing.

This no doubt is what is meant by the injunction so often on the lips of Jesus, “**He that hath ears to hear, let him hear**” (Matthew 11:15; Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8).

When Dr. F. J. A. Hort writes of F. D. Maurice, “I have thought for years that he is intelligible and profitable to a person so far as that person needs him and no farther,” he expresses a truth which is capable of very wide application.

We also must stimulate the craving for truth, and alike in stimulating and satisfying we shall find our reward in what for our present purpose we will call eloquent hearing.

I. First, then let us glance at the importance of obtaining an attentive and responsive hearing.

How important this is will be evident if we consider that more perhaps than any other form of address the sermon is of immediate moment, because, as Richard Hooker says, the sermon “spends its life at its birth”; with the preacher it is “now or never.”

1. The whole history of the Christian pulpit furnishes abundant proof that it is possible for the preacher to obtain the hearing of which we are now speaking.

Jesus had it. Preaching at Nazareth, in his early ministry, as he spoke, the eyes of all that were in the synagogue were fastened on him; and when that ministry drew to its close, as he walked with two of his disciples and opened to them the Scriptures, their hearts burned within them (Luke 4:20; Luke 24:32).

The apostles and first preachers had it. To this the sermons of Peter and Paul, recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, bear witness.

Later preachers have had it also. “Better that the sun should cease to shine,” cried the throngs at Constantinople, “than that our Chrysostom’s mouth should be stopped.”

As Savonarola exposes the evils which threaten Florence, the disciple who is taking notes of his master’s discourse can write no longer. “At this place I was so overcome by weeping that I could not go on.”

The church, wardens of St. Margaret's Church, Westminster, find themselves under the necessity of paying the carpenter "for mending of divers pews that were broken when Dr. Latimer did preach."

A Cambridge student gives a boy a few half-pence to hold his horse while he follows a crowd of peasants on the village green who are flocking to hear "one Bunyan, a tinker, prate." As he listens he vows that he wishes never to hear any other preacher than he. To the Connecticut farmer pushing his way to the place where Whitefield is preaching "like one of the old aposels," "every horse seemed to go with all his might to carry his rider to hear the good news from Heaven for the saving of their souls."

2. Such a hearing is essential if our ministry is to do its best work.

The minister shows his wisdom when he guards against the subtle and plausible vanity "which courts a compliment or is fed by it."

When some one told John Bunyan at the close of a religious service that he had preached a good sermon, the answer was "Yes, the devil told me that before I came down from the pulpit."

"It is not good," says manly Phillips Brooks, "that the minister should be worshiped and made an oracle. It is still worse that he should be flattered and made a pet."

But the knowledge that in his congregation he has devout and intelligent hearers who listen for his sake as well as for their own, is unspeakably helpful to the preacher if he is a true man. Happy indeed is he who can with reason cherish it. John Foster, detailing to a correspondent his early experience in the pulpit, writes: "I have involuntarily caught a habit of looking too much on the right hand side of the meeting. 'Tis on account of about half a dozen sensible fellows who sit together there."

To his mend John Greene, Robert Hall said, with his wonted frankness, "O sir, I could always tell when my people were pleased and when the subject told, from their manner of hearing."

It was the general fervor of the congregations which gave such acceptance to the sermons of the preachers during the evangelical awakening of the eighteenth century, and this in a large measure accounts for the eagerness with which discourses were then received, which are "curiously flat, formal, and unimpressive" to us when we occasionally disturb the dust of a century in order to get at them. Spurgeon reveals the secret of their efficacy when he says, "I have listened to many sermons from preachers called poor, in all corners of the country, and I never heard one which did not teach me something, if I was in the spirit to profit by it."

The mediaeval legend commemorates a popular preacher under whose sermons numbers were converted, and to whom it was revealed that not to what he said were these effects due so much as to the prayers of a poor and obscure peasant who sat on the pulpit steps, and poured out his heart in prayer for a blessing on the message which was being delivered.

And George Herbert, in his own quaint way, points our thoughts even higher than the pulpit steps when he sings of preachers:

The worst speaks something good; if all lack sense,
God takes a text and preacheth patience.

3. Yet it is evident that there are many hindrances in the way of this effectual hearing. Let us inquire what causes conduce to make it a thing so rare to find and so hard to retain as it seems to be.

(1) Perhaps we must mention first among these, a natural repugnance to religion.

To a parishioner who told Archbishop Whately that he thought a person should not go to church to be made uncomfortable, the apt reply was, that while this was true, yet whether it was the sermon or the man's life that should be altered so as to avoid the discomfort must depend on whether the doctrine was right or wrong.

And be it remembered that however much the claims of religion are neglected, despised, or challenged, it has remained an incontrovertible fact all through time that there is no other subject of such widespread, profound, and abiding interest as religion.

(2) Something should also be granted on account of the natural inattention of most hearers.

No doubt the great preachers to whom we have referred succeeded in absorbing the attention of their congregations so that for the time they held them spell-bound; but the large majority of speakers, whether from pulpit or platform or stage, have this trouble of inattention to contend with.

The mind is very easily turned aside by external circumstances. Even Chrysostom needs to remonstrate: "I am expounding the Scriptures, and you all turn your eyes to the lamps, and to him who is lighting them. What negligence is this to forsake me, and fix your minds on him!"

But Chrysostom should have understood human nature better than to lose his temper.

Sydney Smith wittily said what every preacher knows to be true:

"A sparrow fluttering about the church is an antagonist which the most profound theologian in Europe is wholly unable to overcome."

There is a certain sequence in the very inconsequence of Samuel Pepys when he wrote in his diary one Lord's Day in January, 1660:

"To church in the afternoon, where a lazy poor sermon. This day I began to put on buckles to my shoes."

A little later when Dr. Samuel Johnson looks over a London congregation, he says in his gruff way:

“The men are thinking of their money, I suppose, and the women of their mops.”

Even courteous Longfellow has to acknowledge to himself in his journal:

“I cannot always listen to the clergyman.”

Luther preached a duty which he himself would have been the last man to practice when he said:

“If God speaketh to thee as he did to Balaam - by the mouth of an ass - thou must have so much patience as to hear him.”

With much more reason Professor Huxley, who had not the hearing of sermons in mind either, wrote:

“An ineradicable tendency to think of something else makes me an excellent test-object for orators.”

Probably in the discussions which are periodically waged on the decline of the pulpit, not enough allowance has been made for obstacles to good hearing other than those which are furnished by either the preacher or the discourse. Something needs to be said as to the physical condition of the hearer, and still more on the state of mind in which he comes to church.

The heavy meal, the hurried pace due to Sunday lateness, the multifarious and often ignoble contents of the morning newspaper, a thermometer which registers in the eighties, a close, ill-ventilated building, these are hindrances to effectual hearing for which no preacher ought to be held wholly responsible.

(3) To this may be added a certain inability to think long upon anyone subject.

The spirit of Martha may enter into Mary at the very time when she sits at the Master's feet. With its many petty details, much serving diverts the mind from much thinking. It is not so much lack of interest in the subject upon which the preacher is speaking as it is lack of power to think on anything whatever consecutively.

James Mill, for so many years in the service of the East India Company, says that his intercourse with the directors taught him to cultivate “the mode of putting a thought which gives it easiest admittance into minds not prepared for it by habit.”

The majority of devout persons in our congregations have probably felt much more than they have thought about religion, and sometimes they seem to resent an appeal to their intelligence almost as though they suspected the preacher of an attempt to impose upon them a duty which they have paid him to perform for them.

(4) We need, further, to make full allowance for the fact that as a rule the hearer is entirely in the dark as to what subject the preacher has selected for his discourse.

What he has been revolving for a week, is to the congregation altogether new. It is unreasonable to expect that they will be able at once, on the announcing of his text and theme, to adapt their pace to his. He moves with the velocity acquired by hours of previous study.

Dr. R. W. Dale, it is said, allowed himself fifteen years to get a new idea into the minds of his congregation; and yet as a consequence of long and careful listening to the best kind of sermons, his people were better prepared than are most hearers to grasp a thought and apprehend its various bearings.

(5) Honesty compels me to add that a poor sermon or perhaps a not altogether groundless prejudice against the preacher himself, may account for his not gaining the attention of a congregation.

An uninteresting theme, or unworthy treatment of it, an awkward or unseemly delivery, a failure on the part of the speaker to commend himself to his hearers - are all of them obstacles to be numbered among the hindrances to effectual hearing.

In what has been said under this division of our subject my aim has been to impress the preacher alike with the importance and the difficulty of winning "the hearing ear."

Unquestionably it is one of the prime elements in his power in the pulpit. We refuse to take Luther seriously when he says that as he stands in the pulpit he imagines that all heads before him are simply blocks of wood. To think that would be fatal to successful speech. Cicero's maxim is perpetually true, "*Non est magnus orator sine multitudine audiente.*"

As an orator, Mr. Gladstone rarely failed to illustrate his own words, "The speaker receives from his audience in a vapor what he pours back on them in a flood."

Beecher is of the same mind:

"An audience always puts me in possession of everything I have got. There is nothing in the world that is such a stimulus to me. It wakes up the power of thinking and of imagination in me."

The man who listens to a discourse which, although probably in words far better than he could command, expresses his own experience, or perhaps discovers to him some train of thought which has been in his own mind before, although he was only dimly conscious of its presence, seeing all the while to be hearing his own better self.

This was what the church-goers of an earlier generation meant when they said in commendation of a sermon that they "heard well"; and it is what Lowell puts into homely verse when he writes:

To him 'tis granted
Always to say the word that's wanted,
So that he seems but speaking clearer
The tip-top thought of every hearer.

II. How may such a hearing be obtained?

Briefly, we answer, By paying the proper attention to the preparation and delivery of the sermon.

1. In dealing first with the preparation of the sermon let me repeat that the preacher must learn to prepare it with his audience in view.

(1) Do this, for one thing, in the choice of your theme.

Take subjects upon which either light or leading is needed. Select topics that are of immediate interest. "The man who is out of gear with his own times, cannot interest others" (Bishop Fraser, Manchester. England).

Learn to set aside your own tastes and instead to consult those of what Phillips Brooks happily calls that "strange composite being, the congregation."

Remember that the limitations of Scripture are the only boundaries which you need to respect in this important matter of finding something to speak about. Be like the Scottish preacher of whom it is written: "He stood always at the foot of the Cross, but from that center he swept the circumference of active life" (Dr. W. Anderson, Glasgow).

By all means let your selection be made with an eye to the highest interests of the congregation.

Commenting on the words "**For you Gentiles**" (Ephesians 3:1), Dr. R. W. Dale notes how they suggest the personal element in Paul's work. "It was for the sake of persons - Gentiles, living men and women - that he preached the Gospel, and for their sakes he was a prisoner."

And then he adds: "In a book on preaching by a distinguished French priest, which I read some years ago, it was laid down as the first essential that the preacher should love his congregation. There is truth in that."

So to a popular preacher with whom he was conversing, Doctor Bonar said, "You love to preach, don't you?" and when he received the answer, "Yes, I do," put this further question, "But do you love the men to whom you preach?"

It is this affectionate solicitude for the true interests of his congregation that we catch in Andrew Fuller's soliloquy in his study:

"I am expected to preach, it may be, to some hundreds of people, some of whom may come several miles to hear; and what have I to say to them? Is it for me to sit here studying a text merely to find something to say to fill up the hour? I may do this without imparting any useful instruction, without commending myself to any man's conscience, and without winning, or even aiming to win, one soul to Christ. It is possible there may be in the audience a poor miserable creature, laboring under the load of a guilty conscience. If he depart without being told how to obtain rest for his soul, what may be the consequence?"

“Or, it may be, some stranger may be there who has never heard the way of salvation in his life. If he should depart without hearing it now, and should die before another opportunity occurs, how shall I meet him at the bar of God? Possibly some one of my constant hearers may die in the following week; and is there nothing I should wish to say to him before his departure? It may be that I myself may die before another Lord’s Day: this may be the last time, that I shall ascend the pulpit; and have I no important testimony to leave with the people of my care?”

He who girds himself for his task in such a spirit as this will not fail to preach sermons in which as Longfellow said, “One can hear the heart beat.”

(2) The preacher should also realize his audience in the composition of his sermon.

There are four things certainly which you should aim to do in every discourse that you compose. Let me enumerate them.

First, *interest your hearers.*

I put this first because unless a sermon interests, it fails to receive attention, and no profit can come from it. Like the picture in the gallery which catches no eye, it is there and yet not there. What Wilkie Collins says of books is just as true of sermons. “I never get any good out of a book that did not interest me in the first instance.” On the other hand, what a testimony Arthur Stanley, then a schoolboy of fourteen at Rugby, paid to Doctor Arnold’s power to interest, when, after hearing him preach, he returned to his room, and wrote the sermon out from memory.

In the composition of your sermon, therefore, do nothing to offend a reasonable taste. Choose your words so as to respect the proper limit of pulpit discourse. Handle solemn subjects with solemnity, and delicate subjects delicately. Often suggest rather than paint. Leave the imagination to supply details when physical conditions are to be touched upon. Nothing can be more repulsive than an elaborate description of the crucifixion, or of the suffering on a death-bed, or of the terrors and torments of the lost.

Let it be your ambition to interest all classes of hearers. Aiming below rather than above the average intelligence of your congregation, see to it that thought is clear and language plain. Instead of saying “Do you understand me?” implying that there is a lack of quickness on the part of your hearers, say rather, “Do I make myself understood?” and so lay the blame of obscurity where in all likelihood it belongs.

No doubt it is “the mixture of people who are to be fed with the same food which in reality constitutes the great difficulty of sermons” (Harvey Goodwin).

But this difficulty may be met and overcome if you remember to appeal in your sermon to the intuitions of the soul, to the dictates of the conscience, and to the practical habits of daily life. These three-aspiration, righteousness, usefulness - if they are well handled never fail to touch the great majority of those who are listening to you. It is not enough, however, to interest.

You must, secondly, *endeavor to instruct.*

“The only real point of preaching,” as Francis de Sales says, “is the overthrow of sin and the increase of righteousness.” And yet in order to attain to this consummation we need to regard, first of all, the truth of what we are saying, and then, as a secondary matter, the effect which we think it will produce” (Nettlehip, “*Moral Influence of Literature*,” p. 18).

By all means have a distinct purpose in each sermon that you compose. Pulpit power comes not as a cause but as a consequence. It follows from first enriching the hearer with knowledge.

“Feed the flock of God.”

It is indeed well that the intellect be reached by way of the heart; but it is necessary that it should be reached somehow. Our congregations have minds as well as hearts.

Dr. Archibald Alexander does well to warn us against too hastily assuming that in what would be considered an intelligent congregation “all the members are well-informed persons.”

It is far wiser courteously to assume that our congregations are ignorant as to the matters about which we discourse in the pulpit, than complimentarily to assume that they are thoroughly acquainted with them. There is always more advantage when we presume upon ignorance than there is when we presume upon knowledge.

While interesting and instructing, the preacher, during the composition of his sermon, should also, thirdly, *aim to convince*.

I may be allowed to quote again from Francis de Sales. His father, who had very lofty conceptions of the dignity of sermons, remonstrated with his son for preaching often. “Even on week days the bells go. It used not to be so in my day. Sermons were much rarer. But then, to be sure, God knows those were something like sermons - full of learning, well got up, more Latin and Greek in one than you stick into a dozen.”

The answer of Francis gives us the key to his great success as a missionary preacher: “My test of the worth of a preacher is when his congregation go away saying not ‘what a beautiful sermon,’ but ‘I will do something.’”

“If this impulse to do something is the evidence that the preacher has persuaded by convincing, the most solid and satisfactory results will be likely to follow. The hearer will be built up, and will continue in the faith as one who is grounded and settled (Colossians 1:23).

It was said of Dr. R. W. Dale, as contrasted with his predecessor, John Angell James, that while they both aimed to persuade, the older man would use any method in order to succeed in doing this, while the younger “believed that no persuasion was of lasting value which was not based on intellectual conviction.”

If you interest, instruct, and convince your hearers, it is safe to say that the fourth requisite to a successful sermon will not be wanting in your composition. *It will inspire*.

Is not this where so many sermons fail?

They do not quicken, stimulate, and uplift. So congregations complain that with all its excellence the discourse is often a weariness to the flesh, and the satirist, incarnating the sermon, puts his own sneer into its lips:

With sacred dullness ever in my view,
Sleep at my bidding creeps from pew to pew.

This power to rouse, this vitality which makes the sermon, as Luther says, “a thing with hands and feet,” will come as a consequence of the oratorical temperament of the speaker, and of the skillful choice which he makes of his material for pulpit use, and of the lofty plane which he assumes in his ministry and the momentous themes upon which he discourses, and of the spiritual power, the unction from on high, which he himself enjoys.

So preaching will become not only what Vinet called it, “an action,” but what he himself often succeeded in making it, an inspiration.

2. The eloquent hearing depends not alone on the preparation of the sermon. As much, and perhaps more, it depends on its delivery.

(1) For one thing, the delivery of the sermon should be suitable to the occasion.

Pulpit decorum - the taste which is so grateful when it is found and the lack of which many of our hearers perceive although unable to account for their feeling of dissatisfaction - has not been sufficiently considered in enumerating the elements of a preacher’s power or the secret of his failure.

It is possible that a deficiency in early training, or some personal peculiarities, or a natural indifference to minor matters, may make the word as we preach it unfruitful. Neglect no legitimate means which lie in your power for seeing yourself as others see you. Never suffer yourself to become careless as to what may seem only trifles in your pulpit manners.

Abstain from allusions to yourself. Assume no ministerial airs or pulpit tone of brief authority. Above all, aim to be hidden behind your theme in the spirit of one whose highest; honor it is to preach not himself but Christ Jesus; his Lord. No pulpit is small enough for the preacher who brings into it himself alone, and none large enough for him who brings into it not himself but his Master.

Here let me add as a practical suggestion that in addressing your audience you use no one form invariably, and any form sparingly.

The Scripture terms, “**My friends**” (Luke 12:4), My “**brethren**” (Acts 3:17), “**Men and brethren**” (Acts 1:16), “**Sirs**” (Acts 14:15) will probably answer all ordinary purposes.

(2) While the preacher's delivery should be suitable to the occasion, it is equally important that it should be sympathetic.

Assume that your hearers have come prepared to listen, as on your part you have come prepared to speak (Acts 26:1). Be more and more in touch with your congregation as the discourse proceeds. At first it is natural that you should be concerned chiefly with the sermon, but as you warm to that you should find yourself coming into closer and closer contact with all who are listening to you. If the first third of the half-hour belongs to the sermon and the congregation, the two-thirds which remain should belong rather to the congregation and the sermon. Happy is the preacher who is able to individualize his hearers, so that each one believes that he himself is especially addressed.

An honest scholar hearing Zwingli preach, felt "as if the preacher was pulling him by the hair." As he spoke, the congregation would often grow restless under the spell of this conviction, and sometimes one and another would even make his resentment manifest. "Neighbor," Zwingli would interpose, "I did not mean it for thee more than for myself."

Of Rowland Hill it was said, in the same way, that if you sat in the back seat in the gallery while he was preaching, you would be persuaded that what he said was directed especially to you. No doubt this effect is due in part to a sympathetic tone in the voice, but far more is it owing to a sympathetic chord in the heart.

(3) So, in conclusion, I would say, let your manner be earnest as well as suitable and sympathetic.

Avoid all flippancy, jesting, and trifling. Covet the "blood earnestness" which characterized Bunyan and Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards and Thomas Chalmers. Preach as did Francis of Assisi, "compelled by the imperious need of kindling others with the flame that burned within himself"; and as did Richard Baxter,

As though he ne'er would preach again,
And as a dying man to dying men."

Thus will you belong to the last of the three classes into which Archbishop Magee divided preachers:

First, the preacher you cannot listen to;
Second, the preacher you can listen to;
Third, the preacher you cannot help listening to.

And by you - dealing with a loftier theme and speaking for a vaster future - the tribute which Ben Jonson pays to Lord Bacon may be not undeserved: "No man ever spoke more neatly, more pressly, more weightily, or suffered less emptiness, less idleness in what he uttered. The fear of every man who heard him was lest he should make an end."

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