

THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE TREATMENT OF THE TEXT - CONTINUED

SUMMARY

THE TEXTUAL SERMON

DEFINITION

I. THE TEXTUAL SERMON PROPER

1. Definition.
2. Upon what its success depends:
 - (1) Upon skill in selection;
 - (2) Upon a knowledge of the laws of analysis.
3. Characteristics distinguishing this kind of sermon:
 - (1) Natural and easy;
 - (2) With a distinct advance in thought.

II. THE TEXTUAL - TOPICAL SERMON

1. A distinct advance on the textual method proper.
2. The divisions expressed topically but treated textually.
3. Advance and culmination in the thought demanded.

III. THE TEXTUAL - INFERENTIAL SERMON

1. This method described.
2. Four remarks:
 - (1) The form of this kind of sermon depends on the clearness and cogency of its logical advance;
 - (2) Specially suitable to preachers of a logical cast of mind.
 - (3) This kind of sermon not common. Why?
 - (4) Very effective under favorable conditions.

CONCLUSION:

Why textual preaching is to be commended.

The Textual Sermon

IN the textual sermon the text itself gives the theme, and the divisions of the sermon are naturally suggested by its prominent words. The text is not a mere motto for the sermon, but much more and much better. It is the germ of the sermon, and from it come the life and substance of the divisions. The flavor of the text is everywhere to be detected in the sermon, as the breath of the pine forest is in every fir cone taken from it.

Textual sermons we divide into the *textual* sermon proper, the *textual-topical* sermon, and the *textual-inferential* sermon.

I. The textual sermon in its simplest form may be defined as following closely the words of the text, clause by clause.

1. It does not exhaust their meaning, but confines itself to their bearing on the special theme of the sermon.

For example, the character and purpose of affliction may be the subject of a discourse from the words, "**For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory**" (I Corinthians 4:17), and then the words of the first clause of the text will suggest that this affliction is personal to ourselves, that it is not heavy, and that it is transient; while in the second clause we shall find that the purpose of the application is to work out for us glory in such measure as shall exceed all our tribulations; and this is set forth by the two clauses, "**far more exceeding**" and an "**eternal weight.**"

2. Upon what, we may ask, does a successful treatment in the case of a textual sermon proper depend?

(1) *We answer, on skill, first of all, in selecting, and then in analysis.*

There are, indeed, many passages of the Bible which admit of being treated in this way without any suspicion of triviality on the part of the preacher, but he must always be on his guard against the almost unconscious growth of mere verbalism. "All language," as Emerson says, "is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries are, for conveyance; not as farms and houses are, for homesteads."

(2) In order to divide a text on the lines of its precise language, and to do so intelligently, it is necessary, further, that the preacher should so far understand the laws of analysis that he can *take a text to pieces*, not as a child breaks up a watch, with a club, but as the watchmaker does, with deft and well-trained fingers. To each word its own weight and import must be given, nor must it ever be so detached from its context as to be indifferent to the quarry from which it has been hewn. When well done this simple plan of a sermon is often very happy.

A modern preacher deduces from the words, "**Thou openest thine hand and satisfiest the desire of every living thing**" (Psalm 145:16), these three points as to GOD's way of providing for his creatures: He provides personally ("**thou**"), and easily ("**openest thine hand**"), and abundantly ("**and satisfiest**," etc.). Here is a treatment which does full justice to the psalmist's thought and yet keeps close to the psalmist's words.

3. We notice two characteristics by which this kind of a sermon should be distinguished.

(1) *It should be natural and easy.*

In your divisions, preserve, whenever it is possible to do so, the very words of the text. In treating Hebrews 4:7: "**Again he limiteth a certain day, saying in David, To-day, after so long a time; as it is said, To-day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts,**" W. C. Burns, afterward a missionary to China, but at that time an evangelist of the Free Church of Scotland, discussed, first, the meaning of hearing GOD's voice, then of hardening the heart, and finally found in his text three arguments against this sin: namely,

- Losing the promised rest,
- The danger of neglecting any longer, and
- The solemn responsibility coming from being called "**to-day**."

To divide the words in Acts 11:23 by considering, first, what Barnabas saw - "**the grace of God**"; second, what he felt - "**he was glad**"; and third, what he said - "**cleave unto the Lord**," is to be as faithful to the text as Barnabas exhorted the believers at Antioch to be to their Master. A partition so simple as this suggests a passing caution against the trick of mere verbal division. It is often fatally easy to divide a text by its words. The Puritan preacher illustrated this when, expatiating on a passage in Solomon's Song: "**I sat down under his shadow with great delight**" (Song of Solomon 2:3), he considered the joy of the saint when communing with his Lord under these three heads:

- *What he did* - "**he sat**";
- *Where he sat* - "**under his shadow**";
- *How he sat* - "**with great delight**."

(2) The textual sermon proper should be further characterized by a distinct advance in thought. Each fresh division ought to carry the consideration of the theme one more step toward the climax. If this is done the preacher may not be able in every instance to take the words of his text as they happen to come. So much the better.

The maxim of Joubert is in place here: "Let your mind always be loftier than your thoughts and your thoughts loftier than your language" (See Dale, "*Lectures on Preaching*," p. 176).

As Montaigne wisely says: "It is for words to serve and wait upon the matter and not for matter to attend upon words." Of course when the order of the words gives the order of the thought the rhetorical advance will be all the stronger.

What is it to follow CHRIST? He himself answers when he says, "**If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me**" (Luke 9:23).

Here are three points: self-denial, self-sacrifice, self-obliteration are the three progressive steps in the imitation of CHRIST. In this instance the words as JESUS spoke them furnish the precise order in which the preacher will most naturally arrange his material, because they also furnish the precise law of development in obedience to which true discipleship grows.

II. From a consideration of this simplest kind of textual preaching we pass to the textual-topical method

1. This is a distinct advance on the textual-proper method.

Its success depends on the union of the analytical and synthetical elements in the mind of the preacher.

He uses analysis first that so he may discover the precise meaning and weight of the word of GOD. Doing this the theme will unfold itself and will come to him in happily chosen phraseology. Then a process of synthesis begins by which the subject will grow up under his hand in symmetry and force of presentation.

To illustrate the distinction between this method of making a sermon and the method of simple textual analysis we may take the weighty question to which reference has already been made, "**How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?**" (Hebrews 2:3)

To prepare a sermon on the textual-proper basis all that is needed is that each prominent word shall be taken as a division for the discourse, and in this way, the emphasis laid on "**escape,**" "**we,**" "**if,**" "**neglect,**" "**salvation,**" and "**great,**" will bring out the meaning of the whole passage under six heads.

But at the same time we clarify our thought and arrange it in a compact and more telling manner when we reduce this number to three, and find in our text,

- *A mighty deliverance* ("**so great salvation**");
- *An impending danger* ("**neglect**"); and
- *An inevitable doom* ("**how shall we escape?**")

This order also does justice to the thought of the apostle, who was not setting forth what the Gospel was, but insisting on the impossibility of our being saved if it should be neglected.

2. Notice that under this method the divisions of the sermon are expressed topically, but treated textually.

That is, the thought rather than the words of the text is made prominent, and the preacher is in less danger of falling into a narrow verbal treatment of his subject.

Spurgeon in a sermon plan which shows more art than is usual with him, sets forth with great freshness our love to CHRIST as it is summed up in the words "**We love him because he first loved us**" (1 John 4:19), and he says that our love to CHRIST is:

- (1) A fact deserving open avowal - "**We love him**";
- (2) An effect flowing from a cause - "**We love him because,**" etc.;
- (3) A simplicity founded on a mystery - "**he first loved us**"; and
- (4) A force sustained by another force - "**We love him . . . he loved us.**"

3. We may remark, further, that there should be advance and cumulation in the thought of the sermon.

This the preacher will obtain by observing closely what is the mind of the Spirit in the passage under consideration. The word of GOD is continually moving forward in its thought toward a distinct consummation. The poet-preacher Robertson, of Irvine, in a discourse on Paul's warning to the Ephesians "**And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption**" (Ephesians 4:30), illustrates this in a masterly plan (W. B. Robertson's "*Memoir*," p. 129):

- (1) *A great period* - "**The day of redemption**";
- (2) *A great privilege* - "**Sealed**";
- (3) *A great practical requirement* - "**Grieve not,**" etc.;
- (4) *The great persuasion to the performance of the requirement* - "**Grieve not the Spirit whereby ye are sealed.**"

4. As a concluding remark on the textual-topical treatment of the text, we observe that more than any other it ensures freshness and variety in the sermon.

The mind of the preacher is indeed held in wholesome subjection to the words of his text, and yet at the same time it ranges freely about its central thought.

In proof of this statement, it is enough to say that the textual-topical method is that which is followed by F. W. Robertson, whose sermons more than those of any other one preacher have influenced the pulpits of our generation. His early training gave him a very profound reverence for the words of the Bible, and later in his ministry his own ripe thought trained him to look in every case through the words at the truth which they expressed. Not the flowers of rhetoric, but the solid ore which lay beneath the jeweled turf, was what he sought and found.

Take, for example, his sermon On Christ weeping over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44). Refusing to confine himself to the pathetic picture of the Son of Man in tears, he does full justice to the tragic element in the scene by considering "*Three Times in a Nation's History,*"

- (1) *a day of grace* ("**this thy day**");
- (2) *a day of blindness* ("**hid from thine eyes**");
- (3) *a day of judgment* ("**thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee,**" etc.).

How much better because truer to the circumstances of that memorable incident in the closing days of our Lord's ministry, is this simple but impressive analysis than any amount of mere sentiment such as the ordinary surface preacher would indulge in.

III. The textual-inferential sermon furnishes the third class of sermons which draw their strength directly from the text

1. In this instance the theme is found in the words of the text and the sermon consists of a series of inferences drawn naturally from them.

In the case already considered (Hebrews 2:3) of the man who neglects the Gospel invitation, we infer that he cannot escape condemnation from a consideration of the character, the history ("**which at the first**," etc.), and the magnitude of the great salvation. This example illustrates the first remark which we make, namely, that the force of this kind of sermon depends very much on the clearness and cogency of its logical advance (Phelps, "*Theory of Preaching*," p. 308).

2. For this reason sermons of this class specially suit the preacher of a naturally argumentative cast of mind.

For example, Dr. John Ker, of Glasgow, whose eloquence was especially rich in the logic which is tempered by emotion (as the logic of the pulpit always should be), preaching from the words, "**Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out**" (I John 6:37), infers that JESUS will not cast out any that come to him because to do so would not be according to his promise, his office, his heart, or his wont; and also because to do so would be to desert the work he had begun to do; and he closes with the inquiry, "Where could he cast them?"

3. This kind of sermon is not common, probably for the two reasons, that only a limited number of texts can be treated thus, and only a limited number of preachers are equal to thus treating them.

The text must be one from which a series of logical propositions can be drawn; and the sermon must preserve faithfully the spirit, and even where possible the very words of the text.

4. But when a text of the right order of thought is treated thus by a preacher of the right order of mind this kind of sermon is very effective.

At the same time analytical, synthetical, argumentative, and rhetorical, it commands respectful hearing and lifts the preacher himself into an atmosphere of intelligent popular esteem which is as honorable to himself as it is to his office.

Some of the most effective expositions in Matthew Henry's "*Commentary*" are of this character and show that versatile preacher in his happiest moments (Jeremiah 38:7-13); but it is in the hands of men of a still higher intellectual power that the inferential sermon reveals the fullness of its resources.

The tremendous force of Jonathan Edwards in such a sermon as "*Wrath upon the wicked to the uttermost*" (I Thessalonians 2:16), lies in the resistless logic of a series of conclusions drawn straight from a text upon which most preachers would hesitate to preach; and the same remark holds true about the addresses of C. G. Finney, in which the passionate emotion of the preacher quenches his logical acumen no more than the ripening vines on Vesuvius quench the fires burning at its heart.

In conclusion, let us say that textual preaching is to be commended because he who conscientiously practices it is almost certain to find in it variety of subject, freshness of treatment, and richness of resource.

As a rule, the closer the preacher keeps to the word and the spirit of his message the ampler becomes his treasury of texts and themes. It is only when in his unaided strength he gives himself to seek and search out concerning the things that are done under Heaven, that he cries with the preacher in old Jerusalem "**The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; . . . and there is no new thing under the sun**" (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

The Bible, as Tholuck says, "if it be thoroughly studied and made the theme of public ministrations will be found to be an inexhaustible mine of intellectual and spiritual truth."

We may well profit by the experience of Dr. A. A. Alexander when he writes, "Learn to preach textual sermons. The mistake of my early ministry was in preaching almost solely upon topics. If you preach textual sermons you won't be apt to preach out."

In textual preaching, by the witness of many of the foremost preachers of our century, lies the secret of a long and fruitful ministry.

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