

THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

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CHAPTER TWENTY

THE DELIVERY OF THE SERMON (CONTINUED)

I. DOES NOT CARRY THE WEIGHT AND AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

II. HAS FEW HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS TO WHICH IT CAN APPEAL

III. IS PHILOSOPHICALLY OBJECTIONABLE

1. Produces a sense of separation and distance.
2. A sense of unreality follows.

IV. HAS NO RHETORICAL PARALLELS. GESTURE AND EXPRESSION SUFFER

V. IS UNTRUE TO THE IDEAL OF PREACHING

VI. YET THERE MAY BE REASONS FOR ADOPTING IT

1. In the preacher himself:

- (1) May lack the oratorical temperament;
- (2) May be over-fluent.

2. In the theme of the sermon.

3. In the character of the exercise.

VII. COUNSELS IF THIS METHOD BE ADOPTED

1. Cultivate a style suitable to spoken discourse.
2. Pay much attention to composition.
3. Master the manuscript.
4. Read well.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

NOTE - As to the memorized sermon:

Of two kinds. Great names no reason for our adopting this method. What can be said in its favor?
Open to serious objections. Of all methods, the least to be recommended.

The Read Sermon

IN considering the various ways in which a sermon may be delivered, we deal, first, with the practice of reading from a manuscript. This method presupposes that the sermon has been carefully written, and that it is carefully read. What can be said about it, for and against?

I. That it does not carry the weight and authority of Scripture sanction may be granted at once

The conception of the sermon as we have it now, dates from a period so much later than the last words of the New Testament, that we must not be surprised at this; nor must we sweepingly condemn the read discourse because when Elijah burst in on Ahab with his brief message, or Jonah went through the streets of Nineveh announcing its impending doom, or John the Baptist cried in the wilderness of Judea, or Jesus taught by the waters of Galilee, or Peter rang out his first sermon in Jerusalem, or Paul spoke to the men of Athens on Mars Hill, no manuscript was used.

Under similar circumstances to-day no manuscript would be used. Yet it is certainly worthy of our consideration that nowhere in the Bible is it recorded that a discourse was read; and that when the apostles received their commission to go and teach all nations, there is no evidence that it was in the mind of Him in whose name through all the ages repentance and remission of sins should be preached, that this should be done by means of a read sermon.

II. The habit of reading a sermon has few historical precedents to which it can appeal

There is no evidence that it was practiced by the orators of Greece and Rome. The early church seems to have known nothing of it.

“All the examples of Christian antiquity are against the practice of the reading of written sermons. Neither Basil nor Chrysostom, neither Augustine, nor Luther, nor Calvin, nor their contemporaries, read their discourses” (Coquerel, “Observations pratiques sur la Prédication,” p. 175).

The custom probably dates from the days of conflict between the friars and the early Protestant Reformers, when feeling ran so high that royal authority had to be appealed to in order to curb the excesses of controversial speech.

It is certain that in 1548 Calvin wrote to Protector Somerset, of England, insisting that lively preaching was much needed, and adds: “I say this, sire, because it seems to me that there is little of preaching in the kingdom, but that sermons are for the most part read.”

In earlier and darker days books of homilies had been compiled to be read in churches when the priest was unable to make sermons for himself; and the homilies, which were prepared in the reign of Edward VI, were prepared partly that they might be read to the people by such as were not licensed to preach, and partly in order to secure uniformity of doctrine at a time when there was so much difference of opinion on the part of the clergy.

Charles II., who had probably learned to admire the freedom of the continental preachers, issued an ordinance against “the present supine and slothful way of preaching,” and made the reading of sermons almost an act of treason by declaring that the practice “took its beginning from the disorders of the late times.”

That the Puritans should read their sermons was almost inevitable (W. M. Taylor, D. D., “*The Scottish Pulpit*,” pp. 248, 249).

The inordinate length, the tedious multiplying of subdivisions, as well as the careful doctrinal definitions which characterized them, must have almost obliged the use of a manuscript. Yet even among them there was a strong difference of opinion on this matter, and John Cotton, who in two days could preach three sermons six hours long, stoutly maintained that “reading was not preaching” (John Brown, D. D., “*The Pilgrim Fathers of New England*”).

No doubt it was through the Puritans that the practice of reading sermons came into New England. Neither in Great Britain nor in America has it been the method of the majority of useful and successful preachers. If the great name of Thomas Chalmers be appealed to in its defense, it is sufficient to answer that he who can read as Chalmers did - in tones of enthusiasm that made the rafters roar, hanging over his audience, menacing them with his shaking fist or standing erect, manacled and staring - can be suffered to do as he pleases.

And if reference be made to Jonathan Edwards, it may further be affirmed that even when he was preaching his great sermons he did not always read, and that in his later years he abandoned the manuscript altogether (Allen, “*Life of Edwards*,” p. 41).

What is remarkable, the preachers who have been in the habit of reading have not, as a rule, preferred the method; and treatises on homiletics, written by those who in the pulpit are slaves to the paper, have rather commended extemporaneous preaching. “Henceforth,” Chalmers wrote in his journal after hearing Andrew Fuller preach, “let me try to extemporize in the pulpit.”

“I heard,” says C. G. Finney, “a theological teacher read a sermon on the importance of extemporaneous preaching. His views on the subject were correct, but his practice entirely contradicted him” (Cf. “*Yale Lectures on Preaching*,” Dr. Dale, p. 163; Phillips Brooks, p. 171; W. M. Taylor, D. D., “*Scottish Pulpit*,” p. 232).

III. That the sermon should be read is, further, philosophically objectionable

Between the speaker and hearer it interposes a paper which, except in very rare cases, such as that of Dr. Chalmers, produces two evils.

1. A sense of separation and distance.

Mr. Blaine told a company of ministers at the Congregational Club in Boston, that when they put the nonconductor of a pile of manuscript between themselves and their hearers, they were not preaching the Gospel, “You are only reading it.”

Dr. R. S. Storrs abandoned his written sermon when he had to address the throngs in the Academy of Music, Brooklyn, for this same reason. "Inserting a manuscript between the audience and myself would have been like cutting the telegraph wires and putting a sheet of paper into the gap" (*Preaching Without Notes*, p. 34. See also "*Our Sermons*," R. Gee, p. 235).

2. A sense of unreality naturally follows this sense of separation and distance.

The conviction that the message is with authority, which is absolutely necessary alike with preacher and hearers if the sermon is to do its best work, is very faint, and often, indeed, it is absent altogether unless the speaker is in close, conscious touch with his congregation.

Rowland Hill had reason to gibe at the impotence of "dried tongues." Many will agree with Spurgeon when he says, "The best reading I have ever heard has tasted of paper, and has stuck in my throat," and the conclusion of Dr. Joseph Parker is still more worthy of being laid to heart by every preacher: "Having tried both methods, the method of free speech and the method of reading, I can give an opinion founded upon experience, and I now give it as entirely favorable to free speech. The pulpit will never take its proper place until the habit of reading sermons on ordinary occasions is entirely abandoned; it is official, pedantic, heartless, and ought to be put down."

IV. Let it be remembered again that the practice of reading in the pulpit has no rhetorical parallel

The lawyer in court, the political speaker on the platform, the actor on the stage, do not read.

"The practice of reading sermons" Blair considered to be "one of the greatest obstacles to eloquence." "Elocutionists may read," a Southern preacher says, "but orators never."

Of what invaluable allies in effective speaking the habit of reading deprives a preacher. Gesture is crippled and contracted, and becomes tame and monotonous. The perfection of the art of gesture among the Italians and other nations which naturally possess it in fuller measure than do we, can make even "their legs the emblems of their various thought."

To this extreme we may not wish to go, but still less can we hold with Dr. Samuel Johnson that "action can have no effect upon reasonable minds"; and that "in proportion as men are removed from brutes, action will have less influence on them."

Then again, the facial expression of the preacher who reads his sermons is almost wholly if not entirely lost. The lips, which should never be concealed by the mustache, the pose of the head, the varied expression of the eye, can now do little. The eye is a most powerful auxiliary to the voice. Our Lord and his apostles used it for this purpose. Why should we forfeit a faculty which comes to us sanctioned by such high uses?

John McNeill is justified in calling the attention of his hearers to the phrase, "**Peter fastening his eyes upon him, with John**," and reminding them that "this could not have been done if they had read their little sermon.

That exchange of looks may have decided the man to accept the muscular arm of the fisherman apostle. Is not this a lesson to preachers? They cannot fasten their eyes both on the audience and the paper.’ “

This power of the eye has always been great in secular oratory; why shall it be less so in the case of those who occupy the throne of eloquence, the pulpit? By his opponents the glance of William Pitt was as much dreaded as was his voice. Robespierre, it has been truly said, could quell the French Assembly by his lion eye; while that of Daniel Webster was a gateway out of which marched conquest.

Dr. Thomas Guthrie held that the objection to “the paper lay deep in the feelings of our nature.” These are his words about reading a sermon, and they well deserve to be heeded: “It universally produces more or less of monotony, so much of it as to act like mesmerism on the audience. To keep an audience wide awake, their attention active and on stretch (without which, how are they to get good?), all the natural varieties of tone and action are necessary -qualifications incompatible with the practice of reading.”

V. Assuredly to adopt the habit of reading the sermon is to be untrue to the ideal of preaching

The sermon is a familiar talk, dignified and yet easy, on the highest of all themes. It aims to produce immediate results, and consequently in times of quickened religious feeling the addresses are almost without exception spoken, not read.

The American audiences of the last century, accustomed to a ministry addicted to closely written manuscripts held in the hand and often near to the eyes, were stirred to a passion of enthusiasm by the preaching of Whitefield, “who seemed to pour forth his torrent of apparently unpremeditated eloquence without fatigue or study” (G. S. Walker, D. D., “*Some Aspects of the Religious Life of New England*,” p. 91).

To Whitefield the gathering thunderstorm, which would have obliterated the manuscript, was only another power to be pressed into the service. He invoked the tempest and wielded the lightning with such tremendous power that men and women fell under the power of words which were emphasized by the fires of Heaven.

To sum up: The preacher may very well hesitate before deliberately choosing a method of delivery which has no authority in Scripture, and scarcely a precedent in the great days of the pulpit; for which no parallel can be found in other fields of oratory; and which tends to arrest the power of sympathy between him and his hearers, to weaken the sermon in its appointed mission to produce immediately an impression, and to deny to the speaker the aid of passing incidents which may be arrows of conviction in the hands of the Lord.

VI. Notwithstanding these serious objections to reading, there may yet seem to be reasons why in certain cases it should be adopted

At these we will now glance.

1. Some of them may be found in the preacher himself.

(1) It is possible that he may lack the oratorical temperament.

With Bourdaloue he may not dare look his audience in the face; with Cardinal Newman his felicity of diction may fail him when he drops his pen. In such a case Spurgeon's counsel, "Brother, write if you have not the gift of free speech, and yet are fitted to instruct," will be seasonable. Nor should it be denied that the preacher who dispenses with a manuscript will have to suffer for it.

The perfect self-control of so practiced a preacher as John Angell James, of Birmingham, England, gave no hint of the fact, to which his biographer testifies, that for many years he scarcely ever slept on a Saturday night, so uncontrollable was the apprehension with which he looked forward to the services of the Sunday" (*Life and Letters of J. A. James*," by R. W. Dale, p. 275).

"Why shouldn't I read?" he asked of his colleague when he was anticipating having to deliver a sermon before the London Missionary Society. "Because you are never so effective when you read," was the reply.

"Well, now," Mr. James answered, "I'll tell you how it is. If I preach without reading I shall be miserable for three weeks, miserable till I am in the pulpit; if I read, I shall be quite happy till I begin to preach, though I shall be miserable till I finish" (R. W. Dale, *Yale Lectures*," pp. 156, 157).

It is sufficient to say on this point that immunity from suffering is not essential to a preacher's work, and that although in his resolve to speak without a manuscript he may have to work hard during the week, to rise early on Sunday morning, and to endure the pangs of anticipation and the penalties of reaction, yet he will be in the end stronger and more efficient for the effort.

The cases are probably rare in which by determination and perseverance even the most diffident of preachers cannot dispense with his paper, and benefit alike himself and congregation by doing so.

(2) On the other hand, are there not preachers who by reason of a dangerous fluency of speech would do well to write and sometimes to read?

Dr. Dale, to whom reference has just been made, explained his invariable habit of reading in this way: "If I spoke extemporaneously I should never sit down."

To Mr. Binney, at one time the most popular preacher in London, an old Scotchwoman frankly said: "I am aye glad to see the papers, for when ye take them oot and lay them on the buik, I say to mysel', 'We'll ha'e a deal mair sense the day.'"

2. The theme of the sermon, again, may seem to demand exhaustive treatment and therefore to justify the preacher in reading his discourse.

And yet even here it may fairly be questioned whether a congregation can profit by a line of thought which a preacher cannot pursue without the use of notes. The preacher's own ability to master, vitalize, and deliver truth must certainly be superior to the ability of his hearers, unprepared by training or forethought, to receive and digest what he has made ready.

3. A justification of reading is also found by some of its advocates in the very character of the exercise.

Preaching, they urge, necessitates composition, and the demands of composition, and especially of composition dealing with religion, call for accuracy and finish. In this there is no doubt a measure of force. It may be granted at once that not only is the best extempore speech likely to be marred by grammatical blunders, but; what is a far more serious matter, truth of the first importance may suffer from loose and hasty definition. As to our composition, however, we must learn not to be too fastidious. We must not allow ourselves to be slaves to moods and tenses, and to dread a slip in syntax as though it were the unpardonable sin.

As to the need for careful definition of truths of the first moment, we are one with the advocate of reading sermons; our contention is not for impromptu speech, but only for such a method of delivery as shall do the utmost justice to thought carefully prepared in the study.

VII. Should the preacher conclude, after honestly trying all other methods, that for him it is best to read his sermons, we may offer the following counsels:

1. Cultivate a style suitable for spoken discourse.

Let it have the freedom and force of vernacular address. Speak your sentences aloud in your study before you write them down. Let the fresh air of open day blow through them lest they smell too much of the lamp.

2. Remember that errors in composition which should be quite pardonable in a spoken address are unpardonable when the address is read.

The plainspoken Scotch elder objected to his minister's sermon - first, because it was read; secondly, because he did not read it well; and thirdly, "because it was not worth readin' at a'."

How few read sermons, which by the character of their thought or their composition, seem worth the pains which have been taken in writing them out in full.

3. Train yourself in the free and unfettered use of a full manuscript.

To do this means giving almost as much time to becoming familiar with the composition which you propose to read as is given to it by him who first writes and then lays aside his paper before going into the pulpit (Taylor, "*Yale Lectures*," p. 157).

A skillful preacher of the present day warns the young preacher that “he will never command his congregation if he cannot command his paper” (R. Gee, “*Our Sermons*,” p. 239).

Preach not from but through your manuscript, as Chalmers did (Taylor, “The Scottish Pulpit,” p. 181).

4. Spare no pains to make yourself a good reader.

It by no means follows that should you read your sermons your hearers will not detect the lack of the oratorical temperament and the presence of natural timidity. Attend to your voice, to its tone and flexibility and emphasis.

Charles Dickens learned all his public readings by heart, and knew every word of them without needing to look at the open book which lay on the desk before him. Yet in the anticipation of an engagement, he says that he read over the selections often twice a day “with exactly the same pains as at night” (“*Charles Dickens’ Life*,” by Forster, p. 350).

Mindful that what is known as clerical sore throat is much more frequent with those who read their sermons than with those who use no manuscript, it will be wise for you to attend to position and gesture. An eminent surgeon avers that the malady is caused by the habit of hanging the head. “The speaker who directs his remarks to the buttons of his waistcoat is almost certain to have a sore throat. Clergymen’s heads ought never to be hanged.”

So much may be said by way of counsel; but we say it with the proviso that under ordinary circumstances this is the last method which the preacher should adopt permanently.

To read may be the wiser course to pursue for the preacher who, while he has fullness of thought and grace of language, lacks the oratorical temperament, and consequently falls very much below the level of his own natural abilities when he dispenses with a manuscript. In nearly every other instance we advise against it.

An age of effective preachers is likely to be an age of preachers who do not read. The decadence of the pulpit will be marked by a return to this “supine and slothful way of preaching,” which should never be adopted without conscientious and prayerful consideration of the preacher’s duty to his Master and to the world.

Better perhaps here than anywhere else, we may refer to the memorized sermon, in which either the words are committed to memory without being written down, sentence after sentence being composed and learned, or the words are first written out in full and then the sermon is verbally memorized. The second method is the more common, but neither of them can be commended to the ordinary preacher.

Because Robert Hall inwardly elaborated his great sermons in the very words in which they were delivered, or because Thomas Guthrie never entered the pulpit without having first written and then committed his, no precedent is furnished for us.

On account of his acute suffering, Robert Hall was compelled to refrain from much writing; and Thomas Guthrie inherited the traditions of the Scotch pulpit, which laid under the strictest ban the use of the paper in the pulpit.

No one will question that when the sermon is well memorized, the method combines to a rare degree finish with power, and it is certain that, since the work of committing presupposes careful preparation in addition to the task of acquiring the composition, the preacher who does this will be free from the charge of indolence or superficiality.

The objections to memorizing are, however, very serious. Committing to memory is largely a mechanical process, and it is evident, therefore, that the higher faculties are suppressed rather than stimulated, and the heaviest strain falls upon the inferior ability to remember words.

The full and vivid processes of immediate thought are necessarily arrested, the preacher dreads nothing so much as spontaneity, and shuts the door of his mind against a fresh idea as resolutely as the door of the ark was shut against the flood. However perfectly it be done, the method is only another form of reading. An invisible paper is present to the eye of the preacher, and he is really reading off its contents, line by line and page by page.

If, on the other hand, it be ill done, an audience becomes painfully conscious of the effort which the preacher is putting forth to grasp at the eluding word, and half dreads, half hopes for collapse.

Meanwhile, the fervor and freedom of true eloquence are conspicuous only by their absence.

No method can be recommended which precludes the sudden suggestion of word or thought, and by so doing binds the truth and, to use the Scottish phrase, “stints the Spirit.” Of all methods, memorizing seems to us to be the one least to be recommended. Rare powers of memory combined with rare rhetorical gifts may justify its use. Otherwise it is to be avoided.

~ end of chapter 20 ~

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