THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RHETORICAL ELEMENTS IN THE SERMON-CONTINUED

SUMMARY

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II. THE PLACE WHICH ARGUMENT SHOULD HOLD IN THE SERMON

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(2) Should be seen in the logical consistency of the discourse;
(3) And in the line of thought pursued.

2. Some sermons may be distinctively argumentative:

(1) Sermons dealing with special points in theology;
(2) Sermons preached at critical times.

COUNSELS.

1. Remember what is the preacher’s special duty.
2. Keep in view the true end of preaching.
3. Leave the right impression on the mind of the hearer.
4. Test your preaching by examining its effects.

III. CHARACTER OF THE ARGUMENT IN THE SERMON

1. The Argument from Testimony.
2. The Argument from Analogy.
3. The Argument from Cause to Effect.
4. The Argument from Effect to Cause.

5. The Argument from Cumulative Evidence.

Argument

WE have said that in every sermon there should be statement, argument, and illustration. The prominence which has been given to statement in our estimate of these three will be understood if we reflect that without it argument is out of the question, and illustration futile and unprofitable. Supposing that the foundations of the sermon have been laid in a painstaking exegesis of the text or theme, we are prepared to consider, in the next place, the part played by argument.

I. Consider the importance of argument in preaching

1. This may be seen from Scripture.

Pictorial though it was, a strain of reasoning ran through the teaching of Jesus (Luke 2:46; Mark 11:29; Matthew 22:41). When it was first preached by the apostles the Gospel was preached argumentatively" (Acts 9:20-22; 17:2, 3, 17; 18:4). Our faith in the great central truths of salvation rests on a basis of argument. This is emphatically true of the resurrection of our Lord, to which in their preaching the apostles gave such prominence. Faith in the actual resurrection of Jesus rests on the argument from testimony (I Corinthians 15:1-8); 1 and faith in the resurrection of the believer rests on the argument from analogy" (I Corinthians 15:35-45; C. R. Morrison, "*Proofs of the Resurrection From a Lawyer's Standpoint*").

2. History bears witness to the same effect.

Indifference, skepticism, or open hostility to the Christian religion has, from the earliest times until now, been encountered by a long and noble succession of apologists.

Butler's "*Fifteen sermons*" were "designed to make men think logically on religious matters."

As president of Yale College, Doctor Dwight turned the tide of fashionable infidelity by his sermons to the students.

C. G. Finney met audiences of lawyers with an acumen not surpassed by any of his hearers, and reasoned conclusively in favor of the leading doctrines of Christianity.

Chief Justice Chase, at a certain period of his life, studied the Christian religion as a matter capable of demonstration or confutation, treating it precisely as he would a question of law, "and the result was a firm conviction that it is divine in its origin, authority, and power."

3. Our own experience in this matter may be appealed to.

Paley says, "He only discovers who proves." Before he has spent many years in his vocation, the Christian minister should have furnished himself with a working theology adequate to almost every kind of doubt.

- His personal experience may remind him that it was the reasonableness of the religion of Jesus that convinced him.
- His pastoral visitations will very likely bring home to him the fact that those sermons make the most lasting impression in which there is an element of clear and simple argument.
- His observation of his own pulpit work, and of that of his neighbors, will witness that a preacher who possesses honest skill in argument is sure to command the attention and respect of the most intelligent hearers.

The pulpit is responsible for, large measure of the polite indifference with which so very many sermons are treated by men who assume no such attitude in regard to serious intellectual effort. We have still need to lay to hear John Foster's complaint: "There is a great deficiency of what may be called conclusive writing and speaking. How seldom we feel at the end the passage or discourse that something is settled and done" (John Foster, "*Life and Letters*," p. 117. See also Foster essay "*On the Aversion of Men of Taste to Evangelical Religion*").

II. Pass now to the place which argument should hold in the sermon

1. In every sermon there should be an element of argument.

(1) Even if the preacher confines himself to statement only his statement may have all the force and effect of elaborate reasoning. The power of clear statement is the great power; the pulpit as at the bar. "Half the controversies in the world, could they be brought to a plain issue, would be brought to a prompt termination" (J. H. Newman).

Others besides his own countrymen might have been included in the charge brought against them by Professor Huxley when he said, "Our one great want is lucidity."

It will be well for the preacher to estimate at something near its real value the importance of facts as distinguished from theories. Let him first make sure of them, mindful of Johnson's assertion, "The hardest thing in the world, sir, is to get possession of a fact."

With the facts of Christianity it is that he is chiefly concerned, and about them gather the opinions of the age, the drifts of current and transient thought, and the shifting emphasis which almost every year places upon this or that phase of religion, very much as about the mountain peaks gather the clouds and mists and sunshine and shadow of the hour. He must hold fast in his preaching by what Goethe calls "this central and substantial kernel of the matter, which remains unaffected by any change of condition that time can produce, just as a well-conditioned soul is not disturbed by any accident that may befall the body in which it lies encased."

(2) This element of argument should be found also in the logical consistency of the sermon.

Here it is that the value of a clear and careful plan is so apparent. The plan should be worked over and over again until it is perfectly satisfactory. To stop short of this is to tempt failure. A defective plan will betray its presence by and by in a defective sermon.

Robert Murray McCheyne says that as a student he despised the rules for sermon-making which he received from his professor, but when engaged in the active work of the ministry he changed his mind. “Now I feel I must use them, for nothing is more needful for making a sermon memorable and impressive than a logical arrangement” (R. M. McCheyne, “*Memoir*,” p. 29).

(3) But we go further when we urge that this element of argument should be manifest in the line of thought which the preacher pursues. In every sermon something should call for proof, and receive it. Resolve, by all means, to do your utmost to rescue the pulpit from the disdain poured upon it, not without reason, in consequence of mere dogmatic assertion, or vapid exhortations, or featureless commonplace. John Ruskin writes to a college friend, as one who is himself friendly to preaching:

Yet it requires the preaching of a considerable deal of patience to make one sit out some sermons comfortably. I go, I hope, to receive real benefit of some kind or another but then how am I to be benefited? Not by the bare rehearsal of duties which I know as well as my alphabet not by the repetition of motives which are constantly before me, and which I never act upon; not by the enunciation of truths which I perpetually hear, and never believe but by giving explanation to the duties, force to the motives, proof to the facts.

2. Some sermons may be distinctively argumentative.

(1) Among these we specify sermons which deal with disputed points in theology (E. g., Canon Liddon, “*Some Elements of Religion*.” Archbishop Magee, “*Norwich Cathedral Discourses*”).

Almost all the subjects of which we treat in our sermons will now and then demand to be considered in this way.

To deliver a series of consecutive discourses on “Old Testament difficulties” may not be a wise thing to do; but to carry such a series in one’s mind and without distinct announcement to give in their order the sermons in such a course occasionally, is certainly worthy of commendation. Such subjects as prayer, sin, the atonement, justification by faith, require to be treated in frank recognition of the fact that there are minds in our congregations which hold them in doubt.

And yet even in dealing with disputed points of theology in the pulpit, it is often well to treat them inferentially. They are not to be considered as all of them capable of proof.

Professor Jowett “deprecated any fixed statement of the doctrine of the Trinity, not because he would deny it, but because he would consider human thought conceiving it necessarily inadequate and every expression equally illusive.”

The preacher may hesitate to use in his pulpit discourse the term “Trinity,” because it does not occur in the New Testament and because it has been associated in church history with fierce and often shameful wrangling. And yet he will preach the doctrine by inference, as it is set forth, for example, by the Apostle Peter (I Peter 1:1, 2), and he will do it in the spirit of Horace Bushnell’s confession:

"When the preacher touches the Trinity and when logic shatters it all to pieces, I am at the four winds. But I am glad I have a heart as well as a head. My heart wants the Father; my heart wants the Son; my heart wants the Holy Ghost; my heart says the Bible has a Trinity for me, and I mean to hold by my heart" (Horace Bushnell's "*Life*," p. 56).

(2) Again, sermons preached at critical times will often need to be cast in a mold of argument.

By the title of his volume of Yale Lectures on "*The Gospel for an Age of Doubt*," Dr. Van Dyke has assumed that we live in a time which is "full of the sorrowful and confused confessions of doubt." There is hope in the indisputable fact that this doubt is not mocking or scornful in its spirit, but rather yearns for a renewal of faith, and with the poet finds it

> little joy. To know I am farther off from Heaven
> Than when I was a boy.

Beyond any question it is necessary that the preacher should understand "the serious and pathetic temper of the age"; and yet he will do well to classify doubt in his treatment of it in the pulpit. It is not all of the kind which finds expression in Tennyson's "*In Memoriam*" or "*Amiel's Journal*."

A specialist in skepticism (A. J. Harrison) divides unbelievers into ten classes according as their attitude toward religion is identified with indifference, naturalism, doubt, antipathy, atheism, pantheism, deism, agnosticism, positivism, or skepticism. The preacher must distinguish the doubt which is generated by a corrupt heart and where the wish is father to the thought, from that which comes from the disappointments and sorrows of a hard life, or from the intellectual perplexities of men who are like Jacobi, "Christians with the heart, but Pagans with the head."

We offer four counsels at this point.

(a) *Remember what is the preacher's special duty*. It is to preach the word, deliver God's message to man "The establishment of positive truth instead of the negative destruction of error, was the principle on which the whole of F. W. Robertson's controversial teaching was founded."

(b) *Always keep in view the true end of preaching*. This is persuasion. Argument is only a means to this end. It is possible to be a convincing and yet not a persuasive preacher, and, worse yet, it is possible to lay ourselves open to the charge brought against Carlyle that "he stirred everything but settled nothing." "After all," as Cardinal Newman says, "man is not a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feeling, contemplating, acting animal."

(c) *Be very careful to leave the right impression on the minds of your hearers*. The permanent impression should be chiefly moral and spiritual, rather than intellectual. A sermon which is completely covered by the assertion that it is "an intellectual treat" is, it has been said, "a very bad sermon." Professor Drummond on one occasion warned preachers against "killing the old doctrine and ostentatiously calling on their congregations to attend the funeral." This is not what a minister of the Gospel has to do. The funeral baked meats furnished at such occasions will not satisfy the spiritual cravings of our hearers. Still from their pews the hungry sheep look up and are not fed (R. Gee, "*Our Preachers*," p. 142).

(d) *Learn to test your preaching by examining its effects*. To be admired, wondered at, followed on account of our powers of argument, or indeed of any mere intellectual gift, is not the preacher's true aim. Be satisfied with no results which would not have satisfied Jesus himself when he was on earth. Such transient popularity called only for tears from him, and it was to the people of the one little city which never failed to welcome him that he addressed his weightiest woes, "**because they believed not**." An appreciative satisfaction is not what we should look for at the hands of those who are not yet reconciled to God, or who, even if reconciled, are still far short of perfection. "I should suspect his preaching had no salt in it," Fuller quaintly says, "if no galled horse did wince."

III. Something needs to be said now as to the character of the argument in the sermon

In dealing with this part of our subject we will confine ourselves to those kinds of argument which will be of special service to the preacher. In its wider aspects argument is treated in the various handbooks of logic, and to them the preacher may with profit occasionally turn (Broadus, "*The Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*," Chap. VI).

1. *The Argument from Testimony* (John 9).

Here, since the appeal is to history, a close adherence to incontrovertible facts is of the first importance. Such a subject as the resurrection of Jesus (Westcott, "*The Gospel of the Resurrection*") offers a fine field for this kind of argument, and it seems as though at the present time especially the preacher needs to make use of the testimony of the apostles and eye-witnesses to a great fact in history which cannot be relegated to the region of myth without impugning the whole moral character of the New Testament writers.

2. *The Argument from Analogy* (Mark 4:3-9; James 5:7, 8).

No more effective method of arguing than this can be used by the preacher, because the ordinary reader is familiar with the world from which the analogy is taken; and so analogy is illustration as well as argument. Yet it needs to be remembered that this kind of argument must not be pushed too far.

Analogy implies only a partial degree of likeness. Positive conclusions cannot be drawn from analogy, but only probable conclusions, which become strong in their power to convince in proportion as the analogy is close (Pritchard, "*Analysis of Nature and Grace*").

3. *The Argument from Cause and Effect* (Hugh Macmillan, D. D., "*Bible Teachings in Nature*" Romans 5:1; 8:17).

In dealing with the natural attributes of the Deity this species of argument is valuable. His attributes being assumed as granted, we argue from them to their manifestations here, among men. "**God is love**," what then may we expect as to his purposes, his actions, his ultimate resolve for us? The facts which are commonly granted must form the premises for the argument, and the preacher's skill is shown by the use which he makes of points that are generally conceded.

4. *The Argument from the Effect to the Cause* (Acts 4:13).

This line of reasoning is especially valuable because all men can perceive and decide - in some measure at least - upon effects with which they are familiar. Paley's use of this form of argument in his "*Natural Theology*" was more generally admired fifty years ago than it is now; but the Bible is itself too full of appeals to the wisdom, power, and benevolence of God based on a study of his work (Psalm 94:9) for the weapon which Paley wielded with such good effect to be laid aside as of no further use.

5. *The Argument from Cumulative Evidence* (Romans 8:35-39).

In preaching this may be made to include presumptive evidence and the evidence from induction.

"The degree of probability is as the frequency with which we have observed the same things. It becomes presumption, opinion, conviction, and forms a rule of hope and judgment (Angus Introduction to Butler's "*Analogy of Religion*"). Be careful, in accumulating and marshaling your proofs, to range them in order, so that they shall rise in dignity and importance. The argument from experience which enters so largely into pastoral sermons finds its place and its efficacy here. Every year adds to its weight. All the history of the spiritual life since his time augments the force of David's resolve, "**Because thou hast been my help, therefore in the shadow of thy wings will I rejoice**" (Psalm 63:7).

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