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Preaching 8
The Structure of the Sermon

No Mustardy Tea Please

“Ever since the day I was sent to shop with a basket, and purchased a pound of tea, a quarter-of-a-pound of mustard, and three pounds of rice, and on my way home saw a pack of hounds and felt it necessary to follow them over hedge and ditch (as I always did as a boy), and found when I reached home that all the goods were amalgamated – tea, mustard and rice – into one awful mess, I have understood the necessity of packing up my subjects in good stout parcels, bound round with the thread of my discourse; and this makes me keep to firstly, secondly and thirdly, however unfashionable that method may be. People will not drink your mustardy tea, nor will they enjoy muddled-up sermons, in which you cannot tell head from tail, because they have neither.”

In these words Spurgeon underlines how important it is for the preacher to arrange his sermon material in a clear and orderly way. Everyone gains when a sermon is well structured. The preacher knows here he is going and so he achieves freedom in delivery. The congregation are not confused by the multiplicity of words and unrelated ideas if they are guided by a memorable outline, marked by balance and logical progression, and leading to a climax. Rather, they are thereby enabled to follow the preacher, understand his meaning, maintain their interest and retain the essence of his message.

Some young preachers, who of course must be original at all cost, are at times inclined to dismiss the traditional ways of structuring a sermon as stiff and old fashioned. However, the wisdom of the past cannot be so lightly set aside – as experience at length usually teaches them. In reviewing his early attempts to preach Andrew Bonar once confessed “In looking over my notes I found I made a great mistake. I had no ‘heads’. When we are young men we are apt to think that this is the right way to preach – going straight from topic to topic; but the hearers need pegs on which to hang the truth.”

Every sermon should, therefore, contain an introduction, a major section in which the main concepts are presented in ‘heads’ or divisions, and a conclusion. Together they ought to form a unity and sub-serve the dominant aim of the sermon. Yet within this basic framework, variety of treatment is essential if monotony is to be kept at bay and the curiosity and expectancy of the congregation are to be maintained. After all they are subjected week by week to the same voice, same mannerisms and same cast of mind, to say nothing of the same face, and so the least the preacher can do is to provide as much variety of presentation as possible. But variety is not only desirable; it should also be inevitable if the preacher is doing his job properly. Different texts and subjects with their different applications cry out for different treatment if justice is going to be done to them.

The Introduction to the Subject

The purpose of the introduction to the sermon is to capture the interest of the congregation and to introduce clearly and briefly the theme of the sermon. By taking them from the known to the unknown the introduction becomes a bridge between the experience and needs of the hearers and the message which is to be preached.

The opening sentences of the introduction are crucial if the congregation are to leave their wandering thoughts behind and give their full attention to what is about to be preached. Since hope ever springs eternal, even the most cynical members of the congregation are prepared to give the preacher the benefit of the doubt for a few moments. These opening words have been described as the grappling irons to take hold of the thoughts of the hearers, and if their attention is not caught in the first minutes it is unlikely that it will be gained later in the sermon. While it might be too much to say that a sermon well begun is already half done, it is nevertheless true that failure here usually means that the whole message is a lost cause. As some one put it, "If you don't strike oil in the first five minutes, then stop boring!" William Magee said that there are three kinds of speakers, the ones to whom you cannot listen, the ones to whom you can listen, and the ones to whom you must listen! It is during the introduction that the congregation usually decide into which of these categories they are going to place the man in the pulpit in front of them. So vital is a good introduction to the sermon that many preachers prepare the introduction last, and though they normally preach from brief notes during the main body of the sermon, they write out the exact words which they will use at the beginning.

The traditional way to introduce the theme of the sermon is to announce the text, placing it in its Scriptural and historical background. To some hearers this can be a pedestrian approach but at least it reminds the congregation that the foundation of the sermon is the Word of God and it should also provide a corrective against the arbitrary treatment of the Bible which imports meanings into the text which are far from the intention of the original writer.

Alternatively the preacher can begin where his readers are – a life situation with which they are familiar, a difficulty in the church, or a problem which society is facing. It is then possible in the sermon to set forth the Scriptural teaching on the issue, thus demonstrating that the Biblical message is always contemporary since God's Word is never out of date. A newspaper headline, a chance remark, an anecdote, a quotation, an arresting incident from life or literature, a familiar thought in an unfamiliar setting, the season of the Christian year, a paradoxical statement, a proverb, or a question can all be used at different times as a means of arousing the interest of the congregation and introducing the sermon. The parables of Jesus, describing familiar human experience, and Paul's sermon at Athens, prompted by the sight of the altar to an unknown God, are Biblical examples of leading people from where they are to the truth which God has revealed to men. There is no reason, of course, why more than one of these approaches cannot be combined during the introduction.

The introduction also gives the preacher the opportunity to place his theme in the wider context of the Biblical revelation. So he is able to point out that in the present sermon he is dealing with only one aspect of a larger subject and that there are complementary truths to be borne in mind if a balanced picture of the whole is to be attained.

It is frequently debated whether the preacher in the introduction should also disclose all the divisions which constitute the main part of the sermon. On the one hand this can be a useful map for the journey and is of particular value in a teaching sermon. On the other hand the element of surprise and suspense will be lost if the congregation know from the beginning the route which the preacher will take.

It is a mistake for the introduction to be too long or to promise more than is later fulfilled in the main part of the sermon. One woman, hearing one of the great Puritan preachers take an hour over his introduction was heard to comment that the dear good man was so long a time laying the cloth that she lost her appetite. She did not expect there would be any dinner at all! Spurgeon who tells this story likens the introduction to the town crier alerting the people that he has some news for them to which they should listen. Consequently it should have something striking in it. At the same time he warns “Do not make your exordium a pompous introduction to nothing but a step to something better still.”

Finally, it is worth pointing out that the introduction also introduces the preacher himself to the congregation. The personal, friendly approach is far more likely to win the goodwill of the congregation than the aggressive “Sir Oracle” attitude.

The Heads for the Sermon

The number, contents and arrangement of the heads of the sermon depend entirely on the length and character of the passage with which the preacher is dealing. He may treat a single Biblical text in depth or take a group of texts which elaborate the Biblical theme or trace the development of an idea, or he may set two texts side by side – one a question and the other an answer. Alternatively he may expound a passage or select leading ideas from several chapters or indeed a whole book. The larger the idea to be expounded, the more selective the preacher must be in handling his material else the congregation will be completely overwhelmed by a mass of detail, and soon lose their way. The depth which a preacher reaches will depend upon the length of passage to be expounded.

(It is not always realized that paragraphs are the most natural unit and the basis of thought in Scripture. Our present chapter divisions were not created till 1244. Our Old Testament verses came in 1448 and New Testament verses in 1551. The first complete English Bible to contain verses was the Geneva Bible of 1560. The versical arrangement was designed for reference and study purposes but it could hardly claim to possess the inspiration of the text itself. Sometimes chapter and verse divisions are put in the most grotesque positions and it is one of the merits of modern versions that they arrange the text in paragraph form).

Because of the rich variety of the Bible’s contents, the preacher will find an enormous diversity of material available to him. He may expound a doctrine, argue a case, view a subject from different angles, outline an ethical duty, study a divine attribute, defend a proposition, delineate a character, explore a problem, tell a story or describe a spiritual experience and so on. The main divisions of the sermon will grow naturally out of the passage in hand and represent its principal aspects. Some preachers have exceptional gift in this area. William Robertson Nichol spoke of Alexander

MacLaren's silver hammer with which he could touch a text and it would immediately break up into its natural and memorable divisions. Into each head will go relevant ideas and their restatement in different words, evidence, factual information, definitions, contrasts, Biblical parallels, applications and illustrations. These can be expressed in short paragraphs, each containing a single clear-cut thought, which are preferable to unbroken meandering stretches.

It is important that the sermon heads progress naturally and logically from one aspect to the next until the culminating and most telling point is reached. Furthermore, it helps the congregation to understand the message if each point is introduced by a clear and memorable phrase. These phrases will often remain in the memory long after everything else is forgotten. There are times when apt alliteration's artful aid can be used with striking effect for this purpose. But on the other hand this can have its dangers and the artificial, forced and excessive use of alliteration is frequently counter productive, prompting many an inward groan from a long suffering congregation.

Unless all the points of the material collectively form a unity, and enforce and illumine the dominant theme of the sermon, they can rapidly become a group of disconnected sermonettes. A sentence summarizing each point after it has been preached and carefully constructed transitions further help the listeners to think with the preacher and so follow him closely. Any unexpected jump in the preacher's thinking will soon throw his listeners into confusion.

For modern congregations it is essential that the main heads of the sermon are few in number. The Puritan preacher who once reached "seventy sixthly" is not to be imitated by a pastor who wants to retain his congregation for any length of time. The conventional pattern for the sermon is the threefold division. Its origin can be traced to mediaeval times and it is widely known that Alexander MacLaren two or three generations ago regularly "fed the sheep with a three pronged fork". It is undeniable that people can normally remember three things with ease, while the basic form of an argument is also threefold. Yet, though it may be news to some, there is no inherent sanctity in the three-point sermon, and experience shows that it can easily become a strait jacket or else a refuge for a lazy preacher. The ridiculous lengths to which bondage to the habit can lead is illustrated in a story by Martyn Lloyd Jones. One old Welsh preacher, dealing with the account of Balaam, was able to derive his first two points – a good trait (early rising) in a bad character, and the antiquity of saddlery – from the story itself. At this point his inspiration gave out, but because every good sermon must at all costs have three heads, he went on "Thirdly and lastly, a few remarks concerning the woman of Samaria"!

Some of the most effective sermons ever preached contained two points only. The most obvious example is William Carey's sermon on Isaiah 54:2-3 – "Expect great things from God: Attempt great things for God." And the obvious way to treat Acts 2:42 is to use four heads, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer". The golden rule is that content must always control the form.

The Conclusion of the Message

From many points of view the conclusion is arguably the most important part of the sermon. Far from being something which can be arbitrarily stuck on, it is an integral part of the sermon and is the end to which the earlier parts of the sermon should be directed. It is the destination towards which the rest of the journey has pointed. In the doctrinal parts of his sermons Jonathan Edwards was said to be getting his guns into position but it was in the application that he opened fire on the enemy. Since what is said last will linger longest, it follows that if the conclusion is badly executed the other parts of the sermon will largely have been preached in vain. The better the beginning, the greater the disappointment if the end is a failure. If the sermon starts with interest it should end with effectiveness.

Yet frequently the conclusion receives less attention than the rest of the sermon. In both its preparation and delivery the preacher is tired, and at the same time the congregation also become weary at the very moment when they should be most alert. It is therefore a fatal mistake to scamp the preparation of the conclusion, and those who hope that something suitable will somehow come to them while they are actually preaching, usually hope in vain. Because of the perils of an inadequately prepared conclusion many preachers prepare it first when their minds are fresh and at their best. Then seeing the end from the beginning they make certain that the introduction and main heads lead logically to the conclusion. In this way they not only achieve a pleasing unity but also ensure a maximum impact for their message. It is noteworthy that though Alexander MacLaren committed to memory only a few sentences of his sermon, they always included the final ones. He showed thereby his concern for a masterly finish to his message.

The precise nature of the conclusion will be largely determined by the underlying purpose of the sermon and the needs of the congregation. While the truth will have been applied as the sermon has proceeded, it is at the end that the final application will be made. It is at this point that the preacher, addressing the reason, feelings and the will, makes clear the difference which his message should make. It is absolutely essential for the message to be applied, otherwise – to quote John Wesley’s opinion about one of the lifeless sermons of his day – “it is likely to do as much good as the singing of a lark”.

Sometimes the preacher will recapitulate the main points of his sermon – without repeating the whole sermon – especially if a case has been argued. Thus he binds everything together, and presents it whole to the congregation, following the example of Luther who emphasized the importance of “dinning the truth into their heads continually”.

On other occasions the sermon can be ended by giving directions about its implementation in the different aspects of personal and social life. A final illustrative story will bring relief to a tired congregation and, if well presented, can make the point so clearly that few if any concluding comments are necessary. Some sermons about Christian practice or the devotional life deserve to end with down to earth guidance to the congregation about the practical steps they should take from this point onwards. With truth it has been said that “How” is the most neglected word in preaching. Could the reason be that many preachers themselves do not know?

Many sermons demand a verdict from the congregation as they have been challenged to commitment, worship, obedience or service. In this kind of ending no one should be left in any doubt about what is required of him and of the consequences which inevitably follow acceptance or rejection. If a sermon has most of the time been in the shadows, it can end by way of contrast in the sunshine – or vice versa. Sermons can also be concluded by a suitable quotation, a text of Scripture, or by prayer. If the last is included, the preacher ought to make sure he is absolutely sincere and that he is not using the prayer as a gimmick or a device to escape the embarrassment of an ill-prepared conclusion. In exceptional circumstances a formal conclusion can be omitted providing that the sermon has made such an impact that the congregation can unmistakably draw their own conclusion. Needless to say many of these endings are not mutually exclusive and sometimes two or more can be usefully combined.

It remains to be added that conclusions often lose their effectiveness by mistakes which could easily have been avoided. It is always wrong to introduce at the end new material on the spur of the moment, because the conclusion is designed solely to apply what has already been taught. Another mistake is making an apology for the sermon as this can only undo any good that has been done and cause embarrassment all round. After all, the congregation may not have realized it was a “feeble effort” until the preacher told them so. In the context of a sermon says someone, “an apology always stinks”. Furthermore banality is studiously to be avoided. Sangster tells of a preacher at a watch-night service who repeatedly emphasized the thrill of turning over to a clean sheet. Then with a dramatic gesture his final exhortation to the congregation was “Go home and begin the New Year with clean sheets”! Finally, it is always irritating to a congregation when a preacher promises that he is coming to an end, but fails to keep his promise. “Keep faith with your people when once you awaken the joyful expectation of the end!” It has often been said that there are some preachers who say “lastly” and they do last, while there are others – understandably somewhat more popular - who say “finally” and finish!

Postscript

Perhaps the whole matter could be summed up in the words of Paul White, the Jungle Doctor, who expressed the secrets of the preacher’s success in the following way: “Hook ‘em, hold ‘em, hang on to ‘em, humour ‘em and hit ‘em!”