

The Importance of Preaching

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

The sermon emphasizes the importance of preaching in the church, its nature, and the preparation required for effective preaching.

Scripture: Proverbs 15:28, Isaiah 6:8, Matthew 28:19, Luke 4:18, Acts 20:27, 1 Corinthians 1:17, Colossians 4:6, 2 Timothy 2:15, 2 Timothy 4:2, 1 Peter 4:11

Topics: "Effective Preaching", "Church Ministry"

Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas emphasizes the importance of preaching, highlighting the tendency to neglect preaching in modern times and the detrimental effects of poor preaching. He stresses the necessity of strong ministry and effective Church through preaching, drawing examples from the Old Testament prophets, Jesus, and the Apostles. Thomas discusses the historical significance of preaching in maintaining the purity and strength of the Church, citing examples from Church history. He urges theological students and clergy to prioritize preaching, dedicating time, effort, and thought to sermon preparation for spiritual prosperity.

Transcript

Section 1. The Importance of Preaching. [I thankfully acknowledge my indebtedness here and elsewhere to that most valuable book *The Work of the Preacher*, by A. S. Hoyt. (Macmillan & Co.)] There is a decided tendency today to neglect preaching. It is not unfair to say that the average preaching is poor both in matter and manner. Canon Simpson bears testimony to this when he says that: - "The Anglican pulpit can hardly at the present day be described as either interesting, or impressive." [Preachers and Teachers, p. 223.]

The multiplicity of parish organizations demands time, thought, and strength. To organize Services, Clubs, Guilds, Entertainments, is easier than to study for sermons. Parochial work has become multiplied and secularized, with the inevitable effect of weakness in the pulpit. Added to this, there is the consciousness that great preaching is not necessary for ecclesiastical leadership, and as a consequence, administration is regarded as the prime essential for the clergyman. There are also tendencies at work which lead to the depreciation of preaching.

Other channels of instruction are thought to be of greater importance, and the platform and the press are accordingly emphasized to such an extent that in the minds of many, preaching is no longer regarded as essential. It must be confessed, too, that in certain quarters Ritual and Sacraments have been

overemphasized to the disparagement of preaching. With the New Testament in our hands, it is perplexing to read that "the altar is a more sacred place than the pulpit; the function of the priest ... is greater than that of the preacher." [Dean Carter, Preaching, p. 3.]

Considering that the "altar" finds no place in the New Testament, and the Holy Communion is only mentioned twice in all the Epistles, it is certainly difficult to account for the perspective suggested by the above remarks. There are still other tendencies which are positively hostile to preaching. The critical spirit of today is largely impatient of teaching, and considers that it knows sufficient of itself, and has powers of its own which are adequate to all needs. Social problems, too, lead men to denounce what they regard as "mere talking," while the growing materialism and wealth occupy the undue attention of many people.

And yet it is simple truth to say that there can be no strong ministry, and no effective Church today without preaching. The Census of Church Attendance, instituted by the Daily News some years ago, showed with convincing proof that churches are well attended in proportion to the vigour of the preaching. People will forgive weakness anywhere in clerical life and organization sooner than in the pulpit. If preaching should ever be regarded as "out of date," it is pretty certain that Christianity will soon be considered in the same light, for the preached Word and the living Christ have always been closely associated.

We will go so far as to say that the spiritual prosperity of any Church is mainly determined by the preaching gift of its ministry, and we make bold to affirm our conviction that the spiritual condition of the Church today is largely related to the neglect of preaching. When we observe the lack of interest in Church attendance, and, still more, the absence of spiritual power in Church life, we do not think it is inaccurate to describe the situation as due to the neglected gift of preaching.

Preaching is always prominently set forth in Holy Scripture. The prophets of the Old Testament were great preachers. The ministry of our Lord was very largely one of preaching and teaching, and His earthly ministry closed by a fivefold emphasis on the great commission to His disciples to go into all the world. The Apostles were preeminently preachers, and the preaching of St. Paul in such passages as 1 Corinthians 1, clearly emphasizes the truth of his own contention, "Woe is me, if I preach not the Gospel."

Church History tells the same story. Is it not the case that for the first four centuries, when preaching and teaching were emphasized, the Church was kept largely pure and strong, while with the decline of preaching came the loss of spiritual power? Preaching in the Middle Ages was a comparatively insignificant feature of Church life, but its revival in the sixteenth century by Luther and other Reformers tells its own story. The Evangelical Movement of the eighteenth century in connection with Wesley and Whitefield, and many others, bears the same witness, while in missionary work today preaching and teaching occupy a prominent place.

Where the spiritual life has been greatest, there the preaching has been strongest; and it is not in the slightest degree inaccurate to say that wherever the priest goes up, the prophet goes down; and contrariwise, where the prophet is exalted, the priest is seen to be unnecessary. It has often been pointed out that Augustine was prayed for by Monica for thirty years, but the Churches did not attract him. Faustus the philosopher was the great magnet, till at last Augustine reached Milan and came in contact with Ambrose, the great man, the Christian, the great preacher.

Experience today all points in the same direction. Where preaching is emphasized and valued by the minister, the people come and will come. Nothing, however able and effective in writing, will ever make up for the living voice. Not even the great cause of politics, or any other element in life, will ever supplant

preaching. "Truth through personality" is the classical definition of preaching, and carries with it clear testimony to the essential need of the person as the channel of the truth.

If people are ever impatient with preaching today, it is not with the fact, but with the sort. The call of the present time on theological students, and on the younger clergy in particular, is to give special attention to preaching. Both in theological colleges and in parochial work we must make preparation for preaching a prominent feature and factor of our clerical life. We must give the best we can in matter and manner. We must work as hard as we can in order to produce the best results.

No time, no strength, no thought, no effort, can be too much to devote to this duty. Even if this means the surrender of parochial organizations, the result in the long run will not be harmful, but advantageous. It may be that we need to do less in order to do more. By transferring purely secular administration to laymen, or if we cannot obtain them, by omitting such secular methods and concentrating our attention on the spiritual element of the ministry of the Word, we shall obtain the best and most permanent results of the ministry.

There is perhaps nothing in life to compare with the joy of true preaching. What an exquisite satisfaction it gives to witness for Christ, in proclaiming His Gospel, in teaching His truth, in cheering the lonely, the sorrowing, the desolate, and the afflicted, by some message from on high. Above all, is there anything in the world to compare with the profound and inspiring satisfaction of winning men and women to Christ through preaching, and of ministering to their education as we endeavour to build them up in their most holy faith?

Let us be firmly convinced of, and deeply impressed with the absolute necessity, the supreme importance, the profound influence, and the great joy of preaching the Gospel. Well said the great Thomas Goodwin, "God had only one Son, and He made Him a Minister."

Section 2. The Nature of Preaching. Homiletics is the science of which preaching is the art, and the sermon is the product. But what is a sermon? Many years ago the following definition was given in the course of a lecture on this subject: - "An oral discourse, or address to the public mind on a religious subject, carefully prepared, with a definite object." This definition consists of five parts, each of which needs careful study. 1. "A sermon is an oral discourse or address."

This means that a sermon is a speech, not a book, or a treatise, or an essay. No one can doubt that the extemporaneous ideal is the true one. The Latin orator was not a reader, but a speaker, and the true idea of preaching is to combine the weight of matter in reading and writing with the ease, fluency, versatility, and animation of speech. To quote Bacon's familiar words, "Reading makes the full man, writing the exact man, conversation the ready man." 2. "An oral address, to the public mind."

A sermon is not a lecture, either scientific or literary, nor is it a forensic oration. It is an address to a mixed class, and therefore ought not as a rule to deal with any specialty, still less with any technicality. "I do admire the vicar's sermons, mum; ■E's so wonderful fluid." "I'm so glad you like them, Mrs. Smith; do you understand them?" "Me, mum? Oh, no; I wouldn't presume to hunderstand ■em, mum." 3. "An oral address, to the public mind, on a religious subject." It is not concerned with politics, or literature, or science.

The sermon is essentially Christian, and is to be drawn from the Bible. A definite message should be extracted from the Scriptures. As a matter of history, the sermon is a definitely Christian institution. 4. "An

oral address, to the public mind, on a religious subject, carefully prepared." It is a serious and dangerous fallacy that preaching is a gift rather than an art. It does not come as a chance effort. According to some people, it would seem as though sermons are made very much according to the description of Aaron's work with the people's gold.

"There came out this calf." But we know that unless a sermon obeys the laws of art, and is the result of genuine work, it will be of no value whatever. It was the great Henry Melville who, in reply to the inquiry how many sermons a man could prepare every week, said, "A clever man, one; an ordinary man, two; a fool, as many as you like." If our sermons are not the result of downright hard work, they will not be sermons at all. 5. "An oral address, to the public mind, on a religious subject, carefully prepared, with a definite object."

An essay simply presents truth for consideration, but a sermon adds to presentation the two essential elements of persuasion and action, and unless this definite object is steadily kept in view, the preacher will not provide a sermon. Preaching is God's Word to man through man, and the motto of every preacher should be, "I have a message from God to thee." A story is told of a tradesman who was convicted by the sermon of giving short weight to his customers, and as the result of what he heard he went home and "burned his bushel".

This indicates the true ideal and aim of the Christian sermon. When these aspects of the nature of a sermon are carefully considered we shall easily beware of the common fallacy which regards rhetoric as equivalent to sophistry and unreality. We often read in newspapers and magazines that a certain pronouncement was "rhetorical" rather than "logical," as though rhetoric meant making the worse appear the better cause. Rhetoric, properly understood, means the art of fluent speech ($\rho\epsilon\omega$, to flow), and there are four things included in every true consideration of the term. (a) There must be composition, or the expression of thought in words with clearness, force, and grace. (b) There must be elocution, or effective delivery of what has been prepared. (c) There must be an appeal to the understanding in order to convince of truth. (d) There must be an appeal to the will in order to persuade it to obey the truth presented. When we get all these elements in mind we have some conception of what is implied in a sermon.

Section 3. The Preparation For the Sermon. "Some men prepare their sermons; other men prepare themselves." Lyman Beecher (or his son, Henry Ward Beecher, for the story is told of both) was once asked, "How long did it take you to prepare that sermon of this morning?" "Forty years," was the reply. The sermon is only properly made in proportion as the life is being enriched. A well-known American preacher has suggestively and strikingly said that it takes three men to preach a sermon: the physical man, the mental man, the spiritual man. [C.

E. Jefferson, Quiet Hints to Growing Preachers.] And each of these three elements of preparation must be included and given proper attention. The physical preparation is by no means unimportant. Eating is to the body what fuel is to the fire; and just as a fire must not be choked up with too much fuel if it is to burn brightly in a short time, so, if the physical powers are surfeited with eating just before a sermon, the preaching must necessarily suffer. Fresh air, a well-ventilated study, and regular exercise will be found invaluable in preparation for preaching.

We will also venture to go further and say that the man's bodily powers, in view of his work, will be all the more vigorous if he is a total abstainer from alcoholic drink and tobacco. Not least, the clergyman ought to

have one day's rest in seven. It cannot be right for the minister to break the law of the Sabbath, and if he can arrange that his rest day is Saturday, or Friday, he will come to his Sunday's work at the highest point of bodily vigour. Monday, as the rest day for clergymen, is to be deprecated on the ground that it will make Sunday the weakest and Tuesday the most vigorous day of the week.

But if Friday or Saturday be adopted, the Lord's Day will be the day of fullest power. Intellectual preparation necessarily occupies a very prominent place, and by this is to be understood the exercise and training of memory, reason, and imagination. Let no preacher think that "anything will do" for a sermon. If he is not prepared to undertake genuinely hard mental work, he has failed to realize one of the prime necessities of all preaching. Intellectual preparation will start with a general study of the Bible.

This indeed will be the paramount necessity. The preacher must be in the true sense a "man of one book". This study, in so far as it is intended to minister to preaching, will include a careful consideration of the various periods, close attention to the biographies, and a constant study of the books of the Bible. Side by side with this, the preacher will make a point of studying both preaching and preachers in order to become acquainted with the best methods and at the same time to keep up his own ideals.

We must not only read the best sermons and the best books on preaching, but take every opportunity of hearing the greatest preachers. A general study of books will also form an essential feature of intellectual preparation for preaching. This will preserve the mind from falling into ruts, increase our general information and material for sermons, help in the interpretation and application of the Bible, and enable us to enter into sympathy with the men of our time and the tendencies of our age.

This general study of books will include as far as possible some acquaintance with History, Science, Philosophy, Fiction, and Poetry, though of course, as temperaments vary, emphasis will be laid on one or other of these departments of life. The value of History is that it reveals God in human affairs. The value of Science is that it will bring God before us in nature. The value of Philosophy is that it will manifest God in the process and progress of human thought. Fiction will have its great value as an expression of human character.

No one can read such masterpieces of literature as those of Shakespeare, Bunyan, George Eliot, Hawthorne, Thackeray, and Dickens, without obtaining an added knowledge of that human nature with which we have to deal in sermons. Poetry will help us in particular with the expression of our thought, and a preacher who draws from such "wells of English undefiled" as Milton, Wordsworth, and Tennyson will never lack lucidity and grace. A study of men must also be included in our intellectual work.

Truth must ever be related to life, and a knowledge of men as well as of books will be the sure preventive against mere theorizing. Someone has aptly and wisely said that "a sermon must have heaven for its father and earth for its mother." Once again, let it be emphasized in the strongest possible way that we need the keen and most strenuous intellectual preparation if we are to do effective service in preaching. There are far too many preachers who have been described as "men of thoughts rather than of thought."

Spiritual preparation might be regarded as so essential as not to require notice, and yet it is necessary to emphasize it as one of the methods of true discipline for preaching. Nothing can make up for the training of the spiritual man. This will come about preeminently by the daily devotional study of the Bible, which will give freshness, force, and fragrance to our message. The man who plunges his soul in the pure stream of Bible meditation day by day will find his preaching marked by vividness and purity which will bring joy and blessing to his hearers.

Indeed, it may be fearlessly said that such a devotional study of the Bible will do much to settle critical questions for the preacher himself; for when a man has fellowship with God through His Word, it gives him a criterion to test everything in the Bible. If a man meets God in the book of Genesis, that meeting will affect every subsequent consideration of that wonderful book. Devotional reading will also form part of our spiritual preparation, and so long as it is kept really secondary to the Bible, it can do nothing but good for us to see what God is teaching other souls, and to learn every possible lesson of His grace and love.

Richard Cecil once said, "I have a shelf in my study for tried authors, one in my mind for tried principles, and one in my heart for tried friends." [Quoted by W. M. Taylor, in *The Ministry of the Word*, p. 55.] But of course this devotional study of the Bible and of other books will always be associated, and, if it may be so said, saturated with prayer. As we honour the Holy Spirit of God, Who is the real Author of the Bible, as we trust Him, as we seek Him, and as we pour out our hearts before Him, our spirits will become strong as the Word of God abides in them, and we shall become "thoroughly furnished" for the work of the ministry.

When these three aspects of preparation - the physical, the intellectual, and the spiritual - are fully realized, it behooves us to obtain all possible practice in speaking. We should utilize every opportunity of expressing and enunciating what we have learnt and studied, and all the while we should put our very best preparation into everything we do. A true sermon means the expenditure of the entire man. When William Pitt was asked what was the quality most needed for the position of Prime Minister, he answered, the first was patience, the second patience, and the third patience.

In like manner, if we are asked what is the quality most essential in preaching we should be inclined to reply, the first is thoroughness, the second thoroughness, and the third thoroughness. It is in the balance and maintenance of all these three requirements, physical, intellectual, and spiritual, that true sermon preparation will be realized. We must keep on working, growing, learning, meditating, praying, and obeying, and then our sermons will be better and better right up to the end of our ministry, however prolonged it may be.

Section 4. The Preparation of the Sermon. In all suggestions for sermon work it must never be forgotten that individual experience is only valuable for comparison. Every man must be himself and follow the lines of his own temperament. At the same time it may often prove of service to compare notes with others in order to see what general lines of preparation for the sermon are followed. 1. First, we must get our text. This will best be obtained while we are alone with our Bible.

The true-hearted minister will desire and seek to know God's will for His people; and, lifting up his heart in prayer and trust, he will wait upon God for the message. Nor will he ever be really disappointed in his quest. For a Churchman it seems the most natural thing to start with a careful, prayerful reading of the Lessons and other portions of Holy Scripture appointed for the particular Sunday; and while the mind is intent on these, the heart will be seeking God's guidance; and in many instances the answer will come in some suggestion arising out of the Scriptures for the particular occasion.

The value of such a method lies very largely in the variety it gives to our sermons, for at one time we shall be led to preach from an Old Testament topic, at another time from a New Testament subject, whether in the Gospels or Epistles, while yet again, the Psalms will yield their fruit to every earnest seeker. From time to time, however, nothing from the Scriptures appointed for the day will impress itself upon the mind, but in answer to continued prayer and trust something else will be shown, and the mind directed in the right channel.

There is a profound and genuine sense of spiritual satisfaction in the consciousness that our text has come in answer to faith and prayer; it tends to make us confident that our message is from God. 2. With our text ready, we have to bear in mind and apply the simple and yet great principles of all sermon preparation. These principles are usually stated as three in number [Bishop Boyd Carpenter's Lectures on Preaching.], but perhaps it may be permissible to add one more as the final and culminating requirement. (a) We must "think ourselves empty".

By this is meant that we must take our text and proceed to ponder its meaning. Our thoughts should be jotted down as they come, on a sheet of paper, without any attempt at arrangement, but only with an endeavour to elicit for ourselves every aspect of the meaning and message of the text. This effort to think for ourselves will prove of the greatest possible value; and whether it takes a long or short time to "think ourselves empty," we ought not to approach any outside help to sermon preparation until we are conscious that to the best of our ability we have exhausted for the time our own mental possibilities. (b) Then we must "read ourselves full".

After thinking out for ourselves the bearings of the text, the mind is in the proper state to approach the views of others who may have commented, or otherwise written on the passage. The mind that is "empty" becomes thereby hungry, and the consciousness of firsthand thought of our own enables us to assimilate in a true sense all that is within our reach in the books of others. Let us read as widely as possible in the books and magazines at our disposal, and incorporate in the work everything that is appropriate to our subject. (c) Then we must "write ourselves clear".

After thinking and reading it is essential to put our thoughts into proper order, and this can only be done by writing. Since "writing makes the exact man," the use of our pen in sermon preparation will be an indispensable requirement. When we have arranged our outline and method of treatment, we should write out our sermon in full, for the very exercise of writing will give clearness and precision to our thought. The eye is a great help to the mind, and the very sight of what we have written will enable us to correct our material in a way that would be quite impossible apart from writing.

These are the three principles which are usually emphasized in all books on sermon preparation, and it will be seen that they refer exclusively to the purely intellectual aspects of the sermon. For this reason we venture to add a fourth principle to the foregoing. (d) We must "pray ourselves keen". When the intellectual work has been done, or rather, all through the process of intellectual acquisition, our work should be steeped in prayer, and then, when the preparation is over, we must commit ourselves and our work to God in order that our delivery, when the time comes, may be "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power".

If a man will only observe these four principles in his preparation, he will find that they cover the entire field of need. 3. Some words about methods seem to be required at this point. Sermon preparation should begin early in the week. It is injurious to ourselves, as well as wrong to our people, to allow our week to be crowded with engagements which compel us to postpone our sermon work till almost the very end of a busy, and, it may be, tiring week. If we begin on Monday morning for the next Sunday, we shall soon find the advantage in a variety of ways.

Then something, however little, should be done each day. We must never forget the great intellectual law known as "unconscious cerebration". The subject once started, is certain to germinate, and in ways of which we know nothing, material will be gradually collected, and mind and heart will be preparing themselves all through the week as we give attention to our work day by day. Then we must endeavour to

discipline our mind to think distinctly and connectedly. This is easier said than done; and yet unless some effort is made, we shall find our thoughts only desultory and of no practical value.

Further, as we are thinking and reading, we should take every opportunity of using our pen. It is probably true to say that no great speaker has ever lived who did not make full use of his pen. Writing has a remarkable effect upon our powers of thought and reading, and no clergyman can afford to dispense with the discipline that comes thereby. As Lord Brougham himself said: - "I should lay it down as a rule admitting of no exception, that a man will speak well in proportion as he has written much, and that with equal talents he will be the finest extempore speaker, when no time for preparing is allowed, who has prepared himself most sedulously when he had an opportunity of delivering a premeditated speech." [Quoted by W.

M. Taylor, in *The Ministry of the Word*, p. 121.] At the same time, our writing is not for the purpose of committing our sermon to memory. There are very few preachers who can memorize their sermons and deliver them memoriter with reality and directness. There is a sense in which the words are absolutely true, "Take care of the thoughts, and the words will take care of themselves." If only we ponder and read, and read and ponder, when the time comes for us to deliver what we have prepared, mind and memory will not be found wanting. 4.

It now remains for us to consider with care the essential requirements of every sermon. They seem to be four in number. (a) There must be definiteness of aim. It is said of one preacher that "he aimed at nothing and hit it every time." A man should know with clearness and directness what he wishes to elicit from his text and deliver to his people. At every point of his preparation he should rigidly inquire of himself, What do I mean by this? What does the text teach? What do I intend to give to my people? (b) There must be simplicity and precision of language.

All high-flown language should be carefully avoided. Simplicity, lucidity, and preciseness are all that are required of the sermon. A man's wife should not be termed "the partner of his joys and sorrows," and we must carefully avoid the temptation to be original in the desire to keep clear of the hackneyed and trite. The Curate who wished to dispense with the familiar "From the cradle to the grave" did not improve matters by describing life as "from the bassinette to the sepulcher."

We must do our utmost to weigh words, to seek their etymological meaning, and to cultivate familiarity with their true force. For this purpose that valuable book, Skeat's *Concise Etymological Dictionary*, will prove of constant service; indeed, many a sermon even will be derived from that quarry. We must also do our best to cultivate style. Perhaps for pulpit work there are no authors to compare with George Eliot and Froude, because of their simplicity, force, and directness; and one of the finest models for the young clergyman is to be found in the well-known books and tracts by the late Bishop Ryle of Liverpool.

It is known that he commenced his ministry in a country parish in the West of England, and determined to model himself on the great Canon Henry Melville of St. Paul's; but he soon found that the country folk were utterly unable to appreciate the rounded periods and florid language employed after the example of the eminent and eloquent Canon. And so Mr. Ryle, to use his own expression, determined to "crucify his style". He did so to some purpose, in view of the almost unique terseness, clearness, and force of his inimitable writings.

In the course of an article some years ago by the late Ian Maclaren, reviewing his ministry, he gave expression to the following words: - "Had I another thirty years, I should give more earnest heed to style,

and especially I would enrich my mind by daily study of its great masters, so that as a farmer quickens his soil by nitrates, one might enrich his mind by the assimilation of noble language. ... Nothing has degraded preaching more than tawdry appeals, in which the pathos has no passion, and the argument no force.

Evangelistic preaching has seemed to us to be, as a rule, careless to a scandal and almost squalid in style, with vain repetitions of hackneyed words by way of exhortation and with incredible anecdotes by way of illustration. But I am moved at present to judge this difficult and delicate form of preaching with the utmost charity, when I review the glaring deficiency of my own style and the repeated evidence of unfinished work. Let me record my solemn conviction that in the day when he gives in his account the preacher of the Evangel will be held responsible, not only for the truth which he declares, but for the dress with which he clothed it." [British Weekly.

A fine leading article, evidently by the Editor, on "The Morality of Style" appeared in the British Weekly for July 19, 1906, and it is much to be desired that it could be available for careful study by preachers.] (c) There must be clearness of arrangement. The old-fashioned "Heads" to Sermons are by no means unworthy of consideration by preachers of today. They help the preacher in his preparation, and they certainly help the hearer to follow point by point the various divisions of the sermon.

It is quite unnecessary, as we shall see later, to announce these "Heads" beforehand; but if they are mentioned one by one as they come, it will conduce to clearness of statement which will be undoubtedly effective. But whether we have "Heads," or not, there should be something like a logical arrangement of the sermon from commencement to conclusion. (d) There must be forcefulness of application. A sermon without an application is not a sermon at all, but only an essay. Application is like the bait on the hook.

We must be "fishers of men". A clergyman once told a friend of mine that he had laboured for eleven years in one parish without knowing of a single conversion. My friend and I knew very well that the man who made this confession was one of the ablest and most acceptable of teachers, honoured and loved by his people, and all who knew him. But, as my friend explained it, "The fact of the matter is, he provided a splendid meal, but he did not show the people how to eat it." In other words, he was a teacher, but he did not apply his teaching and lead to immediate acceptance and obedience.

Let us never fail to drive home our message and make it as personal, direct, and definite as possible. Along these lines it may be confidently said that a general preparation of the sermon will proceed. Once again, let us fix it in our minds that no work can be too great, no labour too severe, no trouble too much, no toil too exacting, if the Christian preacher is to do his duty to his God, himself, and his people.

Section 5. The Structure of the Sermon. [In this section it has only been possible to summarize (mainly from Hoyt chaps. vii - ix) what all authorities on sermons require. The three books on this subject to be studied by preachers are Hoyt, Broadus and Phelps (see Bibliography).] Every sermon should have a plan. It is true that sermon outlines, or plans, are not very fashionable in the present day. They are either ignored or else very carefully disguised, and yet they possess a twofold advantage: they are good for the preacher, and certainly good for the hearers.

The preacher will be enabled to study much more intelligently if he proceeds along the lines of a carefully worked out plan. He will be helped to keep a proper proportion between the parts of his sermon. His edifice will not be all porch, or otherwise out of proportion. For extemporaneous preaching a sermon plan will be of extreme value. Not least in importance, an outline will provide a constant exercise for the mind in construction. For these reasons a clergyman should certainly practice the making of sermon plans and

outlines.

As to hearers, no one can doubt that an outline makes a sermon intelligible and attractive. People are able to carry away the main ideas of the preacher if they are put before them in something like outline form. This outline should conform to the regular threefold division of every true sermon; the Introduction, the Substance, the Conclusion. A. The Introduction is very important. It is said that John Bright always wrote out the introductions to his speeches. Someone has remarked that "the first five minutes of a battle are decisive."

But whether this be the case, or not, the first few seconds of a sermon are undoubtedly of the greatest importance. 1. What should be the substance of a good Introduction? It should possess four qualities. (a) It should be arresting, in order to gain attention. An introduction should never be too obvious, and for this reason it should be made as interesting as possible. When a preacher commences with the hackneyed words, "The chapter from which my text is taken," one feels inevitably inclined to settle down to slumber.

All the best preachers make their introduction attractive and arresting. (b) It should be sympathetic, in order to win the goodwill of the congregation. One of the finest books for work among children is called *The Point of Contact*, showing the need of a teacher becoming at once en rapport with his juvenile hearers. The same thing is really true in connection with sermons, and it is of the greatest importance to win the goodwill of our audience by some point at the outset with which they will agree. (c) It should be appropriate.

The introduction must have a close connection with what follows. If there is no vital relation between the introduction and the substance of the sermon, what is said will not only be futile but harmful. (d) It should be short. Sermons are sometimes weighted with too long an introduction. The house is all portico, and people are tired before the substance of the sermon is reached. Some of us have very vivid recollections of an able and scholarly preacher whose introductions as a rule used to take at least twenty minutes. 2.

What should be the form of a good Introduction? The only answer to this is that the form must be varied if it is to be good. Sometimes it will take the form of an explanation, at other times an observation, and yet again an illustration. So long as there is variety and appropriateness to what follows, we can adopt whatever form we wish. 3. What should be the spirit of a good Introduction? It should be at once modest and simple. Anything approaching egotism or conscious authority in the preacher will be at once futile and fatal.

B. The Substance of the sermon naturally occupies our attention after the Introduction, and this involves a due and appropriate use of the methods of analysis and synthesis. The former will be for instruction, the latter for persuasion. Both are needed and should be constantly kept in view. 1. What is the character of a thoroughly good sermon? (a) It should possess unity. Every part of the sermon should be connected with the rest, and our treatment should proceed step by step from the opening to the close. (b) It should be marked by progress.

We should prepare so carefully that we may be able to avoid putting into division 1 what ought to be in division 2. (c) It should possess clearness. Whether this is done by means of divisions is a matter of opinion and choice. If we have divisions for our sermons, it will usually be found wise not to announce them beforehand, for the element of surprise is of great importance in all preaching. If our subject happens to be specially abstract, or theological, it may well be thought necessary to announce our general treatment beforehand, but, as a rule, in our ordinary sermons each point should be announced at its

proper place. (d) It should be characterized by vitality.

All the unity, progress, and clearness that our sermons reveal will count for nothing unless they are also possessed with life. The dry bones must be clothed with flesh, the flesh must be vitalized, and the sermon made living for its purpose. 2. What are the elements of the form of a thoroughly good sermon? The following four elements will probably be found essential to every satisfactory sermon. (a) There will be propositions. We must state our case, and show our people what we intend to do with our subject. (b) There will be explanations.

We must interpret, elucidate, and justify our propositions. (c) There will be observations. We shall comment on, and apply our text in all suitable ways. (d) There will be illustrations. There are very few sermons that will not be greatly benefited by some illustrations to let in the light and impress the subject on mind and heart. C. The Conclusion of the sermon is not the least important section of it. Indeed, it is absolutely essential, for, as we have said, it distinguishes the sermon from the essay or the lecture. 1.

What is the character of a good Conclusion? (a) It should be short. Let us beware of saying, "Finally" until we are really at the close of our sermon. When a clergyman uses this often welcome sound about twenty minutes before he actually closes, and when it is followed by similar remarks, like "Lastly," "One word more," "In conclusion," hearers are apt to get impatient and resent such an inaccurate use of language. An American clergyman entertained a number of eminent men at dinner.

The guests were speaking in praise of a sermon the host had preached. The preacher's young son was at the table, and one of the guests said, "My boy, what did you think of your father's sermon?" "I guess it was very good," said the lad, "but there were three mighty fine places where he could have stopped." (b) It should be simple. No oratorical flights are in place at the conclusion of a Christian sermon. Young preachers are often tempted to indulge in a "peroration," but it should be avoided as poison, because it will inevitably fail of the effect essential to a Christian discourse. (c) It should be pungent.

That is to say, there must be a direct, personal appeal. Each hearer must feel the force of the words, as though the preacher were saying to him, "Thou art the man." (d) It should be definite. This means that the preacher should not fail to tell his people how to do what is required by the message. Whether it is an evangelistic, or an instructive sermon, this definite presentation of the method of realization must form part of our conclusion. 2. What is the form of a good Conclusion?

Here again, the answer is that it may be, and ought to be varied. Sometimes it will take the form of a recapitulation, but it is not often that a preacher can invest his recapitulation with that freshness which the subject requires. Every review should be a new view, and this is not an easy task. It is probable, therefore, that the more familiar form of application will be the prominent feature in our conclusions. But whatever may be our methods, we must take care that there is a real, forceful, pertinent, and practical ending to our message.

As we contemplate these three parts - Introduction, Substance, Conclusion - we naturally inquire what proportion of our time and material should be given to each. It is difficult to say, but the suggestion has been made that the Introduction should take one-fifth, the Substance three-fifths, and the Conclusion one-fifth of our time. But we must not be slaves to any such rigidity, for from time to time we shall probably find that one-tenth for Introduction, four-fifths for Substance, and one-tenth for Conclusion will be more appropriate to our needs.

The one thing essential is that there should be a fair and due proportion between these three parts, and we can test the matter by the manuscript pages of our sermons when written. If only we keep before our minds the absolute necessity of these three parts and do our utmost to make them the very best we can, our sermons will never lack appreciation on the part of our people.

Section 6. Scripture in Relation to the Sermon.

[See Hoyt, *The Work of Preaching*, chaps. v. and vi.]

As sermons are essentially a Christian institution, the Word of God is naturally prominent and important in connection with them. The Bible often speaks of "the Ministry of the Word," and the Prayer Book title is "Ministers of the Word and Sacraments," never of the Sacraments alone. Added to all this, the Prayer Book itself is full of Scripture, both in the portions selected for use and also in the substance of many of the addresses and prayers. The use of the Bible is essential to the minister merely for style, illustration, and interest; but far more than this, it is essential for his message. All the great preachers have been truly Biblical preachers. No one can read a sermon of Spurgeon's without becoming aware of his intimate acquaintance with the Bible. Holy Scripture was the atmosphere in which he lived and preached. The same is true of all other pulpit giants, like Maclaren, Parker, and Liddon; they were "mighty in the Scriptures". No one can exaggerate the value of a prolonged study of the Bible alone for the work of Christian preaching. If the mind is saturated with such portions as the Fourth Gospel, or the Epistles to the Romans and Ephesians, or the last great section of Isaiah, the result will be nothing short of wonderful in providing thought and experience for the ministry. If our preaching is not Biblical, it is certain to be thin, poor, and hesitating; but if it is made up of the Bible, it is sure to be rich, strong, penetrating, and satisfying both to preacher and hearers. Preaching that is not Scriptural cannot be regarded as Christian preaching. But at once the question arises, What do we mean by Scriptural preaching? Various aspects of the subject call for attention.

I. The Use of a Text.

It is the invariable custom to employ a text as the introduction to sermons. It is a little difficult to discover the origin of the use of the term. "Text" means "something woven," and we may at least apply it to suggest the importance of the message being woven with the Word of God. Shall we continue to observe this old custom of giving out our text? Almost every preacher would answer this question with a hearty affirmative. A text will give a sermon the authority of a Divine message, and this is the most important part of our work. The hearers will also thereby be helped to study Scripture for themselves and will be enabled to recall the sermon as they give attention to the text. But perhaps the greatest value of the text lies in its effects on the minister himself. It will give definiteness to the entire sermon, keep the preacher strictly to his subject, enable him to concentrate attention on the aim of the moment, and in the course of his ministry the use of texts will afford him opportunities for providing the necessary variety in his subjects as he endeavours to bring out of his treasure things new and old. For these and other reasons it is not too much to say that the employment of a text should be continued as in every way of the greatest possible advantage to preachers and hearers.

II. The Choice of a Text. Several considerations should weigh with us in the actual selection of a passage of Scripture for our message. 1. It should be a genuine message. The text should be based on the true meaning of the passage, so far as we can derive it under the guidance of the best available scholarship. Any other use than the true exegetical meaning will need the greatest possible care. Preachers must not

fail to distinguish between interpretation and application; and if our sermon does not deal with the original meaning of the passage, but is used in some secondary way, the fact should be stated and the people told what the passage really does mean in its original idea.

Serious injury is likely to be done if we misuse Scripture by not giving the proper interpretation. A clergyman once delivered a series of sermons on Popular Sins, and when he had to discuss the subject of Smoking, he took as his text, "Do thyself no harm." It is probable that he did himself untold harm by such a deplorable misuse of the Word of God. Care should also be taken about any human words that are found recorded in the Bible, and we should ask ourselves before using such words as our text whether they are true.

If a clergyman takes his text from the speeches of one of Job's friends, it is essential to discover whether the words are themselves true apart from any particular use made of them by the friends, for we remember how they were rebuked by God for giving Job a wrong impression. Of course there are words spoken by man which are true in themselves, as, for example, the words of the guards sent to apprehend our Lord: "Never man spake like this Man"; or the enemies of Christ, "Who can forgive sins, but God only?"

In such cases we are quite safe in taking the words as our text, even though Divine inspiration only concerns the accuracy of the record. On one occasion a minister took as his text the words of Satan: "Skin for skin; yea, all that a man hath will a man give for his life"; and after announcing his text he commenced in a sensational way by saying, "That's a lie." It was a striking way of calling attention to the fact that not every word found in Scripture is a word of and from God. 2.

It should contain a complete message. There is a real danger of using the text as a "peg" on which to hang certain thoughts which may be useful in themselves but have no real relation to the Scripture passage. A text ought not to be employed as a mere motto, or even as a point of departure. Our duty is the elucidation of the text, and we ought not to select our subject first and then ransack the Bible for a text to fit it. It is only very rarely that any clergyman need go outside the Bible for the subject of his preaching.

A deacon once preached from the words, "Nevertheless afterward"; and although he had much to say that was helpful about the discipline of life, it certainly seemed incongruous for so young a man to take so pretentious a subject and with so unsatisfactory a text. As it has been well put, we must be particularly careful not to use our text as a "pretext". 3. It should never be in any way incongruous. There must be no eccentricity, no humour, and of course nothing approaching buffoonery.

Some authorities go as far as to say that there is no humour in the Bible, that the prophets and apostles were too deeply concerned with the realities of life to indulge in pleasantries. Whether this is so or not, the preacher must be particularly careful in his use of passages of Scripture for his text. Even a passage like "Ephraim is a cake not turned" (Hos. 7:8) will need all possible care and reverence. 4. It should be as suggestive and striking as possible. How wonderful is the freshness of Bushnell's sermon titles; they are sermons in themselves.

Who but a genius like Bushnell would have entitled a sermon on Cyrus from Isaiah 45:5, "Every man's life a plan of God?" Another suggestive illustration of the same value of freshness is found in the use of the text "See thou make all things according to the pattern showed to thee in the mount" (Heb. 13:5). [Hoyt, ut sup., p. 135.] No one can read Matheson's Devotional Meditations, Moments in the Mount, without being aware of the great helpfulness of the themes. If our text should happen to be familiar, we must do our

utmost to invest it with some novelty and freshness.

The glorification of the obvious is one of the greatest needs of the ministry, and every man should strive to excel along this line. Perhaps the finest illustration of investing with freshness a familiar text is found in Dr. Maclaren's great sermon on John 3:16. (a) The Lake: "God so loved the world." (b) The River: "He gave His only begotten Son." (c) The Cup: "that whosoever believeth." (d) The Draught: "have everlasting life." We cannot all be Maclarens, but we ought to give our very best attention to the need of investing with newness the most familiar texts. 5.

It should be guided by three things. (a) By our past sermons. There should be as much variety as possible and the avoidance of repetition. Dr. R. W. Dale tells us that he kept lists of sermon subjects pinned up in his study, so that he might be able to see at a glance what subjects he had been taking for weeks and months past. (b) By the present needs of our people. We must consider what we believe to be their requirements, and our texts should as far as possible be such as can be divided and treated intelligently and suitably for our flocks by our own personal predilections.

What grips our own spiritual life is pretty certain to impress our people; and if the Word of God is vital in our own experience, it will inevitably become powerful as we proclaim its message week by week.

III. The Interpretation of a Text.

It is our bounden duty to find and give the proper interpretation of the text as preachers of the Word of God. This will mean study; and unless we are prepared for hard, strenuous, intellectual work, we have not yet conceived the true idea of preaching. The interpretation of the text demands (1) knowledge of the language, whether in Hebrew or English, (2) some acquaintance with Eastern customs so far as they are employed in the passage, and (3) certainly an accurate knowledge of the context on both sides of the passage from which we propose to preach. For example, no one should preach on "Lord, increase our faith" (Luke 17:5) without careful reference to the thought of forgiveness in the context. No sermon should be preached on Nicodemus (John 3:1) without observing the connection in the Greek and the R.V. with chapter 2 and the special point illustrative of Nicodemus' character in the unusual emphasis on the word "man". No preacher should dream of using "Touch not; taste not; handle not" (Col. 2:21) without a thorough knowledge of the situation which led to those words. To separate them from the context and use them on behalf of temperance is to do plain violence to Holy Writ. The use of the Greek will often save us from error, even though it may occasionally spoil some useful sermons. Thus, no one could possibly exalt the ordinance of preaching from 1 Cor. 1:21, if he looked at the verse in the original.

We must also beware of spiritualizing Scripture. Teaching by types is of course legitimate and necessary, but it needs a good deal of intellectual care and not a little spiritual common sense. It would be particularly wise to avoid preaching from the Song of Solomon while we are young in the ministry. I happen to know of a deacon who preached from the text, "I am sick of love," and I should imagine that his hearers were sick in another way. A preacher once had to preach on the subject of temperance, and emphasized quite rightly the importance of Christian people opposing and fighting the drink traffic in every possible way, but it did not seem quite a happy use to make of the text, "Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord."

Not least of all, we must insist on verbal accuracy in our interpretation of texts. There must be no twisting to obtain our point, however important that point may be. Unless there is intellectual honesty on the part of the preacher, there will soon be intellectual disgust on the part of hearers who are just as capable to consider the bearings of Scripture as he himself is. There is scarcely any more clamant call in the present

day in connection with preaching than for a thorough, intellectual, genuine interpretation of the Scriptures we use.

IV. The Adherence to a Text.

The subject should grow out of the text, and usually there will be no difficulty in accomplishing this. To choose and work out a subject and then prefix a text to it is likely to lead to the production of an essay, not a sermon. The text should be the germ and the sermon the product. If only we carefully expound the text, discovering its meaning, and pronouncing it in its natural divisions, we shall be thereby enabled to keep closely to the text all through the sermon. It was a sad and sorry testimony of the hearer who sarcastically remarked of his preacher that there was so little connection between the text and the sermon that if the text had been infected with fever, the sermon would not have caught it. The application as well as the subject and substance of the sermon should be strictly based on the text. Our message is presumably the Word of God, and it must be applied to our hearers. This will prevent us from giving them any mere personal exhortation, still less any oratorical declamation. When subject, substance, and application are thus kept in close adherence to the text, we shall accomplish our purpose as "ministers of the Word".

Section 7. Varieties of Sermons.

When a man is called to minister to the same people week after week for several years, it goes without saying that his messages should have all possible variety. Unless this is so, intellectual and even spiritual ruts and grooves are inevitable, and both preacher and people will feel monotony. The following are some varieties of sermons that should be kept in view.

I. Textual. By this is meant a sermon that arises definitely and directly out of a single text; and if we cannot find a text to fit the topic, it is probable that we shall be well advised to change the topic itself. The fullness of Scripture is such that even the longest ministry may be maintained by sermons that come from Scripture. Before using a text out of its ordinary meaning we must pay attention to the context. Thus if we should be taking Isaiah 61:3, "Beauty for ashes," as a text on the sermon of the transformation of sorrow, we ought first of all to look at it and expound it in the light of Eastern customs and the circumstances of the return of the Jews from exile.

And in all textual sermons we ought to endeavour to divide our texts so as to give unity and definiteness to our message. The following may be suggested as examples of textual preaching: - Genesis 42:21. The three elements of repentance: Conscience, "we are verily guilty"; Memory, "in that we saw the anguish"; Reason, "therefore is this distress come upon us." I remember Dr. A. T. Pierson calling my attention to this when we were travelling together from Dublin to London, and comparing notes on Bible study and sermons.

Matthew 6:33. The Kingdom of God: What? How? Why? Luke 19:42. Opportunity: Given, Limited, Lost. Acts 10:43. The Great Offer: The One Way; The Strong Confirmation; The Simple Means. 1 Corinthians 13:13. Faith, Hope, Love. Why all three are permanent. Why Love is supreme. Colossians 1:21-23. Alienation, Reconciliation, Presentation, Continuation. Colossians 1:27-28. Our Message, our Methods, our Motive. Many other instances of this method will be found in those invaluable volumes of Expositions by Dr.

Alexander Maclaren. The only trouble is that, when we have looked at one of Maclaren's felicitous and inimitable treatments, we not only wonder why we did not see it ourselves, but we find it difficult to avoid a

similar treatment when we are called upon to preach from the passage. Who that has read his sermon on Luke 22:28 can ever forget his natural and suggestive divisions? The Lonely Christ, the Tempted Christ, the Grateful Christ. From a different point of view Dr. Joseph Parker was equally felicitous in textual preaching, and in his People's Bible will be found many of his fertile suggestions.

It is not everybody who would be able to avoid the incongruous in taking such a text as "Now Sheshan had no sons, but daughters" (1 Chron. 2:34), and deduce therefrom the great principle of compensations in life. In Dr. Parker's Ad Clerum there are many illustrations of his striking treatment. Thus on Job 14:10, "Man giveth up the ghost, and where is he?" The treatment is: (1) If he is a good man, he is where he desired to be, where he is prepared to be, and where he will remain. (2) If he is a bad man, he is where he did not desire to be, but where he is prepared to be, and where he will remain.

On 1 Peter 5:7, we are reminded of a traveler with three bundles or burdens: (1) Past Memories, (2) Present Difficulties, (3) Future Fears. All these we are to "cast upon" the Lord. On one occasion I heard Dr. Orr give a brief address on the subject of the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21) who, it was said, made three mistakes. (1) He mistook his body for his soul. (2) He mistook himself for God. (3) He mistook time for eternity. It is difficult to think of any more satisfactory, suggestive, and complete treatment of this passage.

Courses of Textual Sermons are also very useful from time to time. The following may be suggested as illustrations of what is meant. Matthew 2:1-10. The Light. (1) Sought by the Wise Men, (2) Ignored by the Jewish Authorities, (3) Opposed by Herod, (4) Welcomed by Joseph, Mary, and the Magi. Luke 9:57-62. The Three Temperaments. (1) Impulsive, (2) Cautious, (3) Vacillating. Or, Bunyan-like, following the suggestions of the late G. H. C. Macgregor: (1) Mr. Too-Quick, (2) Mr. Too-Slow, (3) Mr. Too-Soft.

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