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## Mastering the Technique of Sermon Building

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### **Mastering the Technique of Sermon Building**

Strange as it may seem, the fact remains that the rank and file of preachers take little or no interest in the technique of sermon building. In fact there seems to be a wide-spread revolt, even in conservative churches like ours, against many of the time-honored homiletical principles by which preachers of former generations were guided in the composition of their sermons. Here and there ministers who claim to have learned much by experience even go so far as to tell their younger brethren: Study homiletics as long as you are at the seminary but forget all about it as soon as you enter the ministry.

It is not difficult to discover the reasons for this ever-increasing contempt of the science of homiletics.

To begin with, not a few earnest preachers who have the welfare of the Church at heart and are intent upon making their pulpits as fruitful as possible have become alarmed on account of the mechanical, stereotyped sermons which in recent years seem to have been the stock in trade of many of our pulpits—sermons which were doctrinally and logically correct but as cold as icicles and as far removed from contemporaneous problems of faith and life as the east is from the west. In their diagnosis of this rigidly formal and lifeless type of preaching they eventually came to the conclusion that it is the result, among other things, of a close adherence to homiletical principles. Hence they cast these principles to the wind and, rejoicing in their emancipation from “the iron yoke,” set about preaching in their own free way.

Others, perhaps just as ambitious but not quite so earnest in their work, give little or no attention to sermon technique because it requires too much hard work. Hard work, however, is not their forte, and so they, often with an air of superiority and an array of specious arguments to justify their attitude, renounce all homilet-



ical principles and, to use their own words, speak to their congregations from the heart in a natural and untrammelled manner—*"wie mir der Schnabel gewachsen ist."*

Still others disregard the accepted principles of sermon composition because they labor under the impression that these are nothing more than antiquated rules perpetuated by pedantic textbooks, rules which dare not be observed by the preacher of the present day if he would touch the hearts of his people. Such an attitude, however, is the result of sheer ignorance. The fact of the matter is that genuine homiletical technique is based, not upon a body of abstract rules formulated at random by impractical theorists and musty pedagogs but upon fundamental principles which, owing to their very nature, are not subject to modification or change. Franklin W. Fisk states the matter well in the following words: "Homiletics is simply a body of principles or rules gathered by a searching analysis of the best sermons in every age of the Church. . . . It is a thesaurus of the combined wisdom of the most successful preachers in the construction of sermons." (*Manual of Preaching*, p. 2.) In short, the principles of homiletics are nothing more and nothing less than common sense applied to preaching. Hence no man can ignore them with impunity.

And the foremost preachers of our day do not ignore them. On the contrary, they follow these principles just as conscientiously as the able preachers of former generations. At times this may not seem to be the case, at least not at first glance; but this is due, not to an absence of homiletical technique in their sermons, but to an exceptional mastery of this technique coupled with a fine artistic sense. By virtue of this happy combination of science and artistry the preacher is enabled to conceal the bony framework of his sermon and to create a living, vibrant message, free from the deadening restraints of cold mechanics and yet clear, convincing, and edifying—the noblest product of homiletic craftsmanship. Beneath the surface, however, present in every portion of the sermon, guiding the preacher and giving form and power to his utterance, the careful student will observe the adroit application of those age-old principles without which there can be no persuasive preaching but only weakness and confusion.

A thorough acquaintance with the technique of the sermon is, therefore, just as important for us as it was for the preachers of the past. It is not enough to know *what* we are going to say from the pulpit and *why* we are going to say it. We must also know *how* we are going to say it. After all, the preacher is a builder. But would any builder venture to assert that all that he needs to erect a commodious and beautiful building is the necessary material and a clear understanding of the purpose which the building is to



serve? Certainly not. He knows that he must have a plan, that he must have tools, and that he and his men must be adept in the use of these tools if the building is not to be a disappointment. In short, there must be both architecture and craftsmanship—technique. Just so in the case of the preacher. In the field of homiletics he must be both architect and craftsman before he can preach sermons that are worthy of the name. He must know how to organize his thoughts to the best possible advantage and how to use the language in such a way as to present these thoughts with telling effect.

When speaking of the technique of sermon building, we have in mind, first of all, the best possible organization of the materials contained in the sermon. There must be unity, order, and progress. The plan must be *logically* correct and well articulated, so that even the uninformed listener may follow the argument intelligently. It must march, and not merely mark time, pushing forward with every sentence and paragraph until the whole matter is clinched and driven home in the conclusion. But the sermon must also be *rhetorically* correct, for mere logic may be as dry as dust. By the introduction of apt rhetorical devices the unbending logical framework of the sermon is covered and adorned, and the presentation becomes animated, interesting, and beautiful. "To make a complete orator," says Fénelon in his second Dialog, "we must find a philosopher, who knows both how to demonstrate any truth and at the same time to give his accurate reasoning all the natural beauty and vehemence of an agreeable, moving discourse, to render it entirely eloquent. And herein lies the difference between the clear, convincing method of philosophy and the affecting, persuasive art of eloquence." Yet even this is not enough for a perfect technique. There is a third requirement: the sermon must be *oratorically* correct, for it is not to be read with the eye, like an essay, but to be heard with the ear, as a discourse. Hence the preacher must aim his language at the ear. He must give due attention to the sound of his words and not only to their meaning, and he must build his sentences and paragraphs so as to invest them with the rhythm and cadence of the spoken word. Thomas Chalmers, the great preacher of Scotland, was a master in this respect, but his mastery was achieved, among other things, by reading every paragraph aloud as soon as it had been written. Finally, the sermon must be *psychologically* correct, for it is addressed not only to the intellect, for the purpose of imparting knowledge, but also to the heart and the will. Its chief purpose is to influence both heart and will in favor of those things which the Word of God teaches and thus to secure the desired God-pleasing action. No matter how correct a sermon may be from the standpoint of theology, logic, rhetoric, and oratory, if it constitutes a psychological blunder, it is



bound to be a failure, unless the Spirit of God overrules the mistakes of the preacher and gives the hearer grace to find the truth and to apply it to himself in spite of the handicaps created for him in the sermon.

In view of the foregoing it is evident that good homiletical technique requires the ability to handle several sermon methods and a great variety of sermon plans. However, it stands to reason that the method and the plan for the individual sermon dare not be chosen haphazardly or according to a fixed schedule. The alert preacher who has at least to some degree mastered his art will almost instinctively employ the method and the plan which will prove most effective in view of his text, his theme, his audience, and the practical objective at which he is aiming. He will say to himself in effect: This is the truth which my text teaches. On the basis of this truth I shall speak to my congregation on this subject, and in doing so I shall have this specific purpose in mind. Now, what would be the best sermon method and the best sermon plan for the accomplishment of my purpose? Instead of working in a hit-or-miss fashion and blundering along in his preaching, he will work as a true craftsman and design every sermon as an effective instrument to attain his purpose.

In this way he will naturally invest his pulpit work with that element which is so necessary in the case of preachers who address the same congregation Sunday after Sunday over a period of years — variety. True, variety may be achieved by a judicious choice of texts and topics, by new illustrations, freshness of application, and versatility of expression. But this is not enough. In addition, there must be a variety of methods and plans; otherwise his congregation, having become accustomed to his one lone method of sermon building, will always be at least one step ahead of him when he preaches and consequently lose interest in his message.

But what can a man do to improve his technique as a builder of sermons?

The first advice usually given in answer to this question is this: Continue to study books written for this purpose. This is good advice indeed, and it is all the more necessary because many a preacher pays very little attention to such books. He seems to have the idea that his diploma has forever absolved him from the systematic study of homiletics. And yet there is so much that we can learn from books of this kind. Dr. R. W. Dale, that rugged and sensible preacher of Birmingham, England, said before the Divinity School of Yale University: "Some men speak contemptuously of lectures on preaching and treatises on the science or art of rhetoric. For myself, I have read scores of books of this kind, and I have never read one without finding in it some useful suggestion. I ad-



wise you to read every book on preaching that you can buy or borrow. . . . The dullest and most tedious writer on this subject will remind you of some fault that you are committing habitually or of some power which you have failed to use." (*Nine Lectures on Preaching*, p. 93.)

But after all such books present only the theory of preaching, and although they do embody many practical suggestions and examples in their discussions, the preacher who reads them will still be confronted with the vexing problem: How can I reduce these principles to practise and carry out in my own preaching the valuable suggestions which I have received?

This opens the door for advice number two: Study the sermons of successful preachers and learn from them how the thing is to be done. "Since it is impossible to know every preacher in his proper background, it is wise to limit the field, perhaps arbitrarily. By careful reading and thinking one can become acquainted with the strongest preachers in any chosen era. Gradually one should single out a certain preacher and make of him a special study." (A. W. Blackwood, *The Fine Art of Preaching*, p. 15.)

That such special or technical study is a necessity if the best results are to be obtained is self-evident, for a mere cursory reading of a man's sermons will not lead us deep into the secrets of his technique. But how shall such a study be conducted? In answer to this question, however only as a helpful suggestion, the present writer submits the following detailed work sheet, which he has set up for use in his own classroom. It should be stated, though, that this work sheet is not altogether original with him since the first part is based upon notes taken in a course on *Christian Preaching from Jesus to Chrysostom* by Dr. Shirley Jackson Case of the University of Chicago, while the second part follows in a general way the work sheet in *The Principles of Preaching*, by Ozora S. Davis. The entire work sheet has, however, been thoroughly revamped and amplified to meet our own conditions.

## WORK SHEET

### The Preacher

A sermon cannot be judged by its contents and form alone, abstracted from its setting. It must be studied in relation to its native environment and linked with the soul which produced it and the soul to whom it ministered if we are to form a proper estimate of it. Hence we ask and answer the following questions:

1) What was the preacher's ancestry, youth, and general education? We must try to determine the individualities and heritages left to him.



- 2) What was his personality, temperament, and appearance?
- 3) What was his professional training and theological position?
- 4) Under what circumstances did he work? What was the cultural situation confronting him?
- 5) To whom did he preach? What were the conditions and problems of his hearers?
- 6) What was his view of the importance of his task? What was the target at which he was aiming?
- 7) What was his contribution to the Church? Which doctrines did he employ in dealing with theological, moral, and secular problems?
- 8) What was his sermon technique? Manner of preparation? Of delivery? What was the reaction to his preaching?
- 9) What is his preaching worth to us? What are its weaknesses? What can we learn from it?

#### The Sermon

1) *Analysis.* Analyze the sermon and make an outline of it. Write down the theme and use Roman numerals for the major points (divisions), capital letters for the minor points (subdivisions), and Arabic numerals for the second minor points. Note the structure of the introduction and the conclusion, and if divisions are necessary, designate them by capital letters.

2) *Title.* Is it characteristic of the sermon? Clear? Interesting? Easily remembered? Conform to the laws of good taste and dignity? Suitable for publicity?

3) *Text.* Is the text well chosen? Properly bounded? Literal meaning preserved or accommodated? Correct explanation given?

4) *Theme.* Is the theme formally announced? If not, state it. Is it textual? Practical? Specific? Interesting? Elegant? Note any defects.

5) *Logical Proposition.* Does the logical proposition which the preacher used in his preparation appear in the sermon? Where? In what way does it differ from the theme? If not stated, where is it implied? Formulate it in your own words.

6) *Introduction.* Is it formally announced? A separate unit? Proper length? Does it excite spiritual and practical interest? Introduce the theme? Create the proper atmosphere? Does the first sentence arrest attention?

7) *Conclusion.* Is it formally announced? A separate unit? Proper length? What type of conclusion is it? Is it compact? Practical? Personal to the hearer? Does it possess dignity and beauty? Energy? Drive home the message of the sermon?



8) *Plan.* Does it unfold the theme logically? Does it make proper use of the text? Is the plan announced? If not, how does it become evident? Does the sermon march or mark time? Is there a climax? Where? Is the development psychologically correct? Does the preacher ever go off on a tangent? Where? What is the proportion of each part? Sufficient time given to important points?

9) *Unity.* Is there a single subject logically developed? A single purpose dominant? Is the style unified throughout? Does the whole discussion focus upon one definite burning point?

10) *Transitions.* How does the preacher pass from one paragraph to another? Make a list of his transitional words, phrases, and other devices. Are there any gaps or abrupt changes? How may the preacher have overcome these defects by his delivery (voice, body action)?

11) *Sources of Material.* From which sources did the preacher derive his material? Bible? Theological works? Own experience and thinking? History and literature? Contemporary life? Other sources? Estimate on percentage basis.

12) *Doctrine.* Is there sufficient Bible doctrine? Law? Gospel? Entire sermon Christ-centered? Doctrine clearly developed? Ample proof texts? Any error? Ambiguous statements?

13) *Illustrations.* From which sources are they drawn? Bible? History? Literature? Nature? Contemporary life? Personal experience? Do all illustrate? Interesting? Are any untrue? Too detailed? Too captivating? Out of harmony with the spirit of the sermon? Is there anything striking about the manner in which the preacher introduces and uses illustrations? Compare his illustrations with those of others.

14) *Application.* Are there enough applications? Grow out of the text? In line with the arrow thought of the theme? Concrete? Timely? Personal? Fresh and interesting? Do they merely show what the text requires of the hearer or also how the hearer may comply with these requirements? How are they incorporated into the sermon? Do they converge in a compact major application in the conclusion?

15) *Style.* Judge the preacher's style in regard to the following qualities: Purity, precision, clearness, energy, beauty, naturalness, and individuality. Give an example of each. Note rhetorical devices used effectively. Any sentences worth filing or memorizing?

16) *Impression.* A sermon is intended to be spoken and heard. Only the ear can judge it fairly. Hence read this sermon aloud, using your imagination to visualize the preacher and his congrega-



tion in their actual environment. What impression does it make on you? In what ways does it differ from other sermons of the same type? Would it meet the needs of your congregation? What are its strong points? Its weaknesses? What is the most important thing you learned from it?

After studying the sermons of several famous preachers at the hand of this work sheet, compare and evaluate the distinctive characteristics of their technique. Then endeavor to improve your own technique by what you have learned.

Finally, study a few of your own sermons according to this work sheet and see what you will find. You may be surprised.  
I was.

E. J. FRIEDRICH

## Kleine Danielstudien

### 6. Die letzten Gesichte Daniels

#### Das Bußgebet und die siebenzig Siebenheiten oder Wochen, Kap. 9

Das besonders wichtige und inhaltreiche Gesicht von den siebenzig Wochen empfing Daniel im ersten Jahr Darius' des Meders. Das ist derselbe, der Daniel in die Löwengrube werfen ließ. Das babylonische Reich war erobert worden, aber die Juden waren noch nicht in ihr Heimatland zurückgekehrt. In diesem Jahre las Daniel zwei Stellen des Buches Jeremia. Dieses Buch war also, jedenfalls mit den andern heiligen Schriften seines Volkes, auch im Exil in seinem Besitz. Er las die Stelle Kap. 25, 11. 12: „Dies ganze Land soll wüste und zerstört liegen, und diese Völker sollen dem Könige zu Babel dienen siebenzig Jahre. Wenn aber die siebenzig Jahre um sind, will ich den König zu Babel heimsuchen und alle dies Volk, spricht der Herr, um ihre Missetat, dazu das Land der Chaldäer und will es zur ewigen Wüste machen.“ Und Jer. 29, 10. 13. 14 heißt es: „So spricht der Herr: Wenn zu Babel siebenzig Jahre aus sind, so will ich euch besuchen und will mein gnädiges Wort über euch erwecken, daß ich euch wieder an diesen Ort bringe. . . . So ihr mich von ganzem Herzen suchen werdet, so will ich mich von euch finden lassen, spricht der Herr, und will euer Gefängnis wenden und euch sammeln aus allen Völkern und von allen Orten, dahin ich euch verstoßen habe, spricht der Herr; und will euch wiederum an diesen Ort bringen, von dannen ich euch habe lassen wegführen.“ Das erste Stück dieser Weissagung des Jeremia war eingetroffen, die Wegführung nach Babel, aber das zweite, die Zurückführung des jüdischen Volkes aus der Gefangenschaft, noch nicht. Wie lange sollte das Volk noch in der Gefangenschaft bleiben? Daniel war inzwischen alt geworden, und diese Fragen und Sorgen liegen ihm auf dem Herzen. Und so spricht er nun, dieser treue