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Writing and Memorizing the Sermon

Wrong methods make sermon work wearisome toil; right methods make it a pleasant task. Good instruction, based upon the experience of all great preachers and speakers, should not be undervalued. Old and tried methods should not be discarded merely because they are old. The young, inexperienced preacher may prefer to do things in his own way, believing this to be the easier way and yet just as effective. The fact is that it is neither. The man, for instance, who reads his sermon in the pulpit will never be a forceful preacher. Reading lacks the directness which makes speaking effective. The preacher or speaker should be the master of his subject, thoroughly understand it, be filled up with it, be eager to tell it to others, and, when before an audience, be unshackled, so that, having his mind on his subject and on his hearers, he will speak not only with his voice but also with his eyes, his facial expressions, his gestures, and, in fact, with his entire body. Is it, then, perhaps advisable that, after all, a manuscript be altogether dispensed with, even in the preparation of the sermon? No, never altogether; in the beginning of a preacher's career not at all.

I

Much hard labor must precede the writing of the sermon. One cannot write with an empty mind. He who would say something must first *have something to say*. The value of any written document, be it even a mere ordinary letter, will be in proportion to the thinking one has done *before* writing. I am fully aware of the fact that writing itself stimulates thought. True, but there must be some worth-while thought to be stimulated. After all, I can write only *what I know*, unless I merely copy what others have said or written.

A thorough understanding of the text, on the basis of the original, the context, and parallel passages, should precede the writing of the sermon. The preacher must find not only the unit thought of his text (as, *prayer*), but the specific thought of the text (as, *why* pray, *how* pray, the *promise* given to prayer, etc.), which distinguishes *that* text from *other texts treating the same subject-matter*. In this way not only the particular text will be preached, but the preacher will be kept from speaking mere platitudes and from becoming stale.

Before writing his sermon manuscript, the preacher should make a good outline, including the theme and the parts, the parallel passages which he intends to quote, illustrations, the application, and a good introductory thought. To procure additional material and to correct his outline, if necessary, the preacher

should consult one or more good, reliable commentaries and other sermon helps. By doing his own original work before consulting commentaries, the preacher will better acquire a full understanding of the text, become more interested in its contents, be better prepared for the writing of his sermon, and will also preach it with more delight and enthusiasm. "We agree with Hyperius," says Loewentraut, "that poor church attendance and poor results of the many, many Sunday sermons is oftentimes to be blamed upon the great lack of original sermon preparation; that certainly accounts for much of it."

II

After having all his material well in hand, the sermonizer is ready to write his sermon manuscript. *The importance of writing the sermon should not be underestimated.* Again quoting Loewentraut: "‘Frei vom Konzept,’ das muss die erste Losung eines auch nach rednerischer Vollendung strebenden Predigers sein. Damit soll aber keineswegs gesagt sein ‘frei von Konzipieren.’ . . . Ein viertes Geheimnis fuer eine wirksame Predigtkunst ist naemlich das Konzept der Predigt, und zwar das eigene, d. h., die eigene Ausarbeitung desselben. Wer die *imagines rerum* genau inspiziert und konzipiert hat im Geist, der wird sich auch irgendwie zu einem schriftlichen Entwurf seines Gedankenbildes gedungen fuehlen und zu weiterer Ausarbeitung desselben genoetigt sehen. Wie viele Prediger mag es wohl geben, deren Predigten eigene Arbeiten sind, selbst gewonnen und durchdacht, eigenhaendig und vollstaendig niedergeschrieben? . . . Leider greifen viele infolge mangelhafter homiletischer Vorbildung fruehzeitig, zumal durch die Naehae des naechsten Predigttermins gezwungen, zu fremden Predigten, oder sie lassen, durch den scheinbar guten Rat, nach Mustern zu arbeiten, bewogen, allmaehlich nach und verlassen sich immer mehr auf eine zuweilen nur notduerftige Durcharbeitung oder mehr oder weniger genaue Aneignung fremder Predigten, ja ganzer Predigtjahrgaenge, eine Arbeit, die obendrein zumeist in den letzten Tagen oder gar am letzten Tage der Woche, oft noch nach andern Arbeiten, erledigt wird. . . . Dass man unter solchen Umstaenden keine wirksame Predigt am Sonntage erwarten darf, liegt auf der Hand." (*Sieben Geheimnisse der Predigtkunst*, p. 21.) In these words Loewentraut mentions as one of the seven secrets of good sermonizing the *writing of the sermon*, and he wishes to have it understood that such writing should be the original work of the preacher. He deplores the fact that many preachers depend too much upon sermon helps and delay the preparation of their Sunday sermon to the end of the week or even to Saturday. "It goes without saying," he says, "that under such circumstances no one can expect to hear an effective sermon on Sunday." Simpson

says: "In the composition of a sermon the collection of material evinces the *diligent student*; broad and comprehensive thoughts reveal the *great thinker*; clear, beautiful, and forcible language manifests the *cultured writer*." (*Lectures on Preaching*, p. 166.)

When we attempt to write on any subject, we discover that some things we thought we knew well need more clarification in our own mind. The preacher, above all men, must be clear and exact in his statements. He must be certain that he says nothing that is contrary to the Word of God or that leaves any one in doubt in reference to the thought he intends to convey. There is too much at stake! The preacher is God's messenger. He is speaking to men in Christ's stead, 2 Cor. 5:20; Luke 10:16. Even statements made in reference to history or science or current events should be absolutely correct; otherwise the preacher will lose the confidence of his hearers. "Writing," says Bacon, "maketh an exact man." When one writes, one has time to revise, to change, to correct. Only in this way will one acquire accuracy of language.

Writing, if done carefully, also prevents one from using too many words. Useless repetition not only wastes time but obscures thought and makes the hearer listless. "*Viel Geschrei und wenig Wille!*" These words may well describe many a sermon quickly prepared during the last hours of the week. Goethe said, "*In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister.*" But to express much in a few words requires careful thinking, careful preparation, careful writing. We seldom find that people in ordinary conversation can express themselves briefly. To send a telegram of ten words is much more difficult than to give the same information in a fifty-word letter. Yet the ten-word telegram may say all that we would have said in a fifty-word letter—and better. Of course, the preacher must have his audience in mind. The two words "vicarious atonement" express to the Christian very briefly the profoundest and most blessed truth of his religion, but to him who understands them not they mean nothing. I am not suggesting brevity at the expense of a clear understanding. But I do mean to say that the preacher should not use forty-five minutes to say what can just as well and better be said in twenty-five minutes.

Writing should also serve the purpose of cultivating a good use of the language which is spoken: words which every one readily understands, avoiding slang and vulgar terms; a careful selection of synonyms, words expressing exactly what one desires to say; a simple sentence construction, giving the preference to short sentences. The sermon should have a literary finish. Of a preacher who is a man of culture this can be and is expected.

A few words ought to be said in reference to *the difference*

between the written and the oral style, writing for print or for oral delivery, for the reader or for the hearer. Strange as it may sound, we should not write as we speak nor speak as we write. We must bear in mind that, while the reader can take his own time in reading, can reread a sentence or a word, and can consult the dictionary, the hearer must get the speaker at the moment of utterance, or he will not get him at all. When preparing an address or a sermon for the hearer, one must make sure that such language and sentence construction is used as will enable *every hearer*, even the unlearned and the young, to understand it *at the moment of speaking*. For the sake of emphasis the speaker may have to repeat a word or an entire sentence, while the writer may merely underscore a word or a sentence, indicating that in print italics should be used. A writer may use a word which, he believes, will be readily understood, while the speaker, using the same word, will at once, by way of audience reaction, sense that he must add a synonym or even an explanatory clause. An anacoluthon used by a speaker may not be a fault, while, if used by a writer, it might be considered a blemish. In short, perspicuity, vividness, and adaptation to his particular audience must be given more attention by the speaker than by the writer. It has been said that the best speeches and sermons are not printed, nor can they be. Many a speech or sermon that has made a deep impression would make poor reading, as many a well-written essay or article would not be very impressive if spoken. The speaker who merely recites his sermon as he has written it does not distinguish between the oral and the written style. When speaking, not only the personality of the speaker comes into play but also audience-reaction, or the interplay between the speaker and the audience.¹⁾

III

Shall the preacher never preach a sermon without having written it? At the risk of being misunderstood or the advice's being wrongly applied, I am bold enough to say that, in the final analysis, the *ideal* way of preaching is careful preparation and free delivery without having written the sermon in its entirety. Some will read this sentence with amazement and even great

1) Preachers should read and study such books as *Historic English and Expressive English*, two books by Fernald; *Speaking in Public*, Phelps; *Principles of Effective Speaking*, Sandford and Yeager; *Practical Public Speaking*, Lyon; *Public Speaking*, Winans; *Handbook of Composition and Mechanics of Writing*, two books by Woolley; *Public Speaking*, Kirkpatrick; *Composition for College Students*, Thomas, Manchester, Scott; *Roget's Thesaurus*. It is self-evident that a good dictionary, such as Webster's, should be at hand and *diligently* used.

consternation, others with delight and real satisfaction; the latter, because they would be relieved of the arduous labor of writing their sermons and the former because they are convinced that such advice will do great harm to good preaching. If what I have said has aroused such sentiments in the minds of my readers, let me say at once that I have been misunderstood.

It is ideal that a human being walks erect, and yet every human being *first creeps* before he walks. It is ideal that a mechanic be a man who can be entrusted with the full responsibility to do well the work in his particular line, and yet every mechanic must *first serve an apprenticeship*. The child which is encouraged to walk too soon becomes bow-legged, and the young man who thinks himself too smart to serve an apprenticeship becomes a bungler. Even so the preacher who will not abide his time in reaching the ideal of good preaching. The man has not yet been born who, upon graduation from the theological seminary, can at once dispense with the writing of the sermon and nevertheless be a good preacher. To preach well without having written the sermon requires a thorough knowledge of Bible doctrine, good general culture, and the mastery of language. All this can be acquired only by years of study, by much careful writing, and by practice, which makes perfect.

It has been said that a preacher should carefully write *all his sermons at least ten years*. After that he may, if he must preach twice during the week, write one sermon in full and preach the other after having made a good outline. In the course of time he may *oftener* dispense with the writing of the sermon *but never altogether*. Sermons on difficult texts and for special occasions should be written, so also sermons on unusual subjects or such as present delicate matters.

To preach a sermon without having written it requires the most careful preparation. *Thorough meditation and the making of a good outline should never be dispensed with*. Even the very words which the extemporaneous preacher will use in elaborating his thoughts must be given some previous attention; especially will he make sure of his opening sentence or sentences, the topic sentence of his paragraphs, his transitions, the use of illustrations, the application which he will make, and his concluding remarks. In fact, some preachers so carefully prepare their unwritten sermons that they could, either before or after preaching them, dictate them to a stenographer. The real purpose of not writing the sermon in full should not be, first of all, the saving of time and labor, *but rather the greater freedom of expression and of delivery*. This method of preaching is now known as *extemporaneous preaching*; not *impromptu preaching*, done at the spur of the

moment, but preaching after careful preparation, yet without writing the sermon in full. Such preaching is natural, not artificial; not too formal in style, and rhetorically excellent.

But some cautions and counsels, says Pattison, must be given to the extemporaneous preacher. "The danger of deterioration in the character of his work is greater in the case of the extemporaneous speaker than in the case of any other." He is in danger of limiting his vocabulary, of falling into the habit of exaggeration, and of misstating the truth. Therefore Pattison says: "Constantly practice composition. Robert Hall, although prevented by his physical infirmity from using his own pen very much, insists that a man will speak well in proportion as he has written much. The reason for this is obvious. It is no easy matter to couple mental exactness to verbal exactness. In the rush of unprepared speech it is hard to avoid overstatement or understatement. Always to choose the proper word and to build it into the sentences in the proper place is an achievement which baffles even the practiced speaker. . . . In advising young preachers to learn how to speak without notes, Dr. R. S. Storrs is careful to insist upon writing. 'Only careful writing separates, signalizes, infixes the richer and remoter words in the mind. We pass over them as we read. We seek them out with the pen.' . . . We may sum up as to the extemporaneous sermon by saying that, while it has been the method used by some of the greatest of preachers, — men who have possessed richness of thought, clearness of intellectual perception, fervor and fulness of expression, and the natural and acquired graces of the true orator, — yet it is an exceedingly dangerous method for the majority of preachers, especially for those, and their name is legion, who have more language than thought. Certainly, of all methods of delivery it is the one which produces the most unequal results. To it belong the most triumphant achievements of the pulpit and also its most humiliating defeats." (*The Making of the Sermon*, pp. 328, 329, 333, 334.) This prompts me to say that even the experienced preacher who attempts to preach extemporaneously but finds that he is not doing well should revert to the method of writing out his sermons in full. Later he may give the extemporaneous method another trial. After all, the secret of good delivery is to be *filled up with your subject* and be *unhampered when presenting it*.

IV

The sermon should never be read in the pulpit. Speaking reaches its perfection only in *free delivery*. This demands that the sermon be *memorized*.

The practice of memorizing the sermon word for word after the Amen has been written and walking the floor all day on

Saturday to accomplish it has made preaching to many a somewhat dreaded task. It need not be such; and it is not to those who have learned *how* to memorize.

Memorizing consists in *good thinking*; in fact, it is a by-product of thinking. When a subject has been mentally well digested, is well understood, has been thoughtfully and carefully written, conscious attempts at memorizing will become largely unnecessary. A sermon may be preached as written, and yet it must not be memorized that way. Memorizing should be done in a topical way. The introductory thought, the theme, the parts, the subdivisions, the topical sentence of the paragraphs, the Scripture-passages quoted, the main point of the application, the story that is introduced as illustration, the concluding thought: these should be impressed upon the memory *in the course of constructing the sermon*.

Memory work should therefore *begin as soon as the preacher reads his text for the first time*. The text the preacher must preach—why not at once fix it in his memory? He carefully makes his *outline*. Why not at once fix this in his memory? He adds proof-texts, illustrations, application, etc. Why not at once fix these things in his memory? At first this must be done consciously; when the habit has been acquired, it will be done more or less unconsciously. Difficult passages may need special attention. Memorizing should not be a process of its own, separated from the preparation of the sermon, but should be *an integral part of it*. When the sermon has been written, the memorizing, at least the major part of it, should also have been done. Of course, the beginner will not at once succeed in this. Practice makes perfect.²⁾

In conclusion it must be said that very much depends upon the *personality* of the preacher. We must admit that one preacher may read his sermons and make a deep impression, while another may preach extemporaneously and be dull and dry. But this fact does not contradict anything I have written; for the one man would be a much better preacher than he is if he would make use of free delivery and in course of time learn to preach extemporaneously, while the other, if he cannot improve, ought not to be a preacher at all. People will not listen to dull, dry, poorly delivered sermons, nor will such sermons be very effective.

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2) The preacher will do well to read such books as *How to Study*, McMurry, or *How to Study*, Kornhauser.