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The Pastor in His Workshop

By L. B. BUCHHEIMER

That presupposes, implies, that the pastor has a workshop and that he works in this shop, commonly termed his study.

"Give attendance to reading" (1 Tim. 4:13) was the Apostle's precept to Timothy. In his judgment, diligent study was an essential duty of a minister of Christ. That his practice was in accordance with his teaching appears not only from his manifold learning, both sacred and secular, which he displays in his writings, but also from his anxiety to have his "books" with him, even when he was "ready to be offered, and the time of his departure was at hand" (2 Tim. 4:6, 13).

In pursuance of this apostolic injunction those who are admitted to the holy office are charged at their installation to "give themselves wholly to this office, with daily meditation and study of the Scriptures, that they may be able to make full proof of their ministry." The subject, then, is one which demands our very careful and earnest consideration.

No one can question the importance of study to the clergy. The laity are more highly educated than they have ever been; there is a very general diffusion of knowledge; the religious teachers of the nation, if they are to win and retain influence over their hearers, must not be behind in the acquisition of knowledge. "The priest's lips should keep knowledge" is a principle never more necessary to be remembered than it is now.

And yet, coincidentally with this great need we are placed in a condition of things which renders it specially difficult for us to meet it. Never were the incumbents of the sacred office beset with such a multitude of calls to duties, pastoral and mechanical, secular and spiritual, as they are at the present day. There are so many demands made upon the pastor's time and energies both from his congregation and from other quarters, that he has but little of either — time or energy — left for quiet and systematic study. The result will be that we will deteriorate, if indeed we are not already deteriorating. We are not altogether to blame for this; our circumstances are more at fault than ourselves. But the consequences are nonetheless lamentable, are bound to show themselves in sketchiness and shallowness of theological

thought, in an unworthy attention to the mere showiness of church service, in a disposition (to employ Scripture phraseology) "to pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin" while we "omit the weightier matters of the Law." And so we maintain that no pastor can without great detriment to his work dispense with careful study.

He is pre-eminently a teacher, and no one can teach a subject well unless he knows it well himself. We do not question this in the case of a secular subject; why in the case of a sacred one? No one can teach with adequate authority except in the confidence which the consciousness of superior knowledge gives him. Moreover, without continued study our sermons are apt to become the mere vapid utterances of the same commonplaces, expressed pretty much in the same language. Accordingly, if we would do our duty to our people, we must not cease to be students.

But how, it may be asked, can a busy pastor find time to be a student? I answer: much can be done by *self-discipline* and *method*.—To make a few specific suggestions which, in my opinion, may be applicable to almost every one of us:

1

The habit of early rising is one which we should do well to cultivate. Some, perhaps, are physically unable to do this and if they did, could not work with good effect. But to very many more the morning hours, before they are disturbed and distracted by the business of the day, are the best for study. The value of forming the habit can hardly be overestimated. I commend the resolution to set aside a part at least of our mornings after breakfast and refusing to be interrupted. The busy doctor names certain hours daily at which he can be found at home or in his office, and his patients have to come to him at those times. Why, with a little firmness and management, might we not secure a few hours of uninterrupted quiet? The fact is that sometimes we find hard reading and steady thought less congenial than a conversation with an interesting parishioner or a stroll. As Dr. Pieper once expressed it: "It is easier to do pastoral work with your *legs* than with your *head*."

2

Fragments of time, spare moments, should be carefully utilized. Those who have not tried it can hardly imagine how much may be done in this way. I know an instance within

my experience where by the systematic use of intervals of a half hour utilized every day much progress was made in the mastery of Hebrew. I have myself read some valuable treatises in that manner. It is for us to make a judicious use of our time, to "redeem" each moment from unnecessary waste. That brings results. It is a familiar and very true adage: "Where there is a will, there is a way." Do we not too often lack the "will"? If we had it, we would generally find the "way." What we should at all events aim at is so to adjust the claims of our various duties that no important one, as study to a pastor plainly is, should be lightly discharged, much less neglected altogether.

Taking it for granted, then, that study is indispensable for a pastor, the next question that arises is: What should that study be? Some guidance upon this point would seem to be desirable, particularly for the younger brethren.

As regards

SECULAR STUDY

let me state that a pastor does not appear to me to do well if he neglect all secular studies, for they not only have a tendency to strengthen and expand the mind, but also they indirectly help us in our work as religious teachers. For example, some acquaintance with science is very desirable for a teacher of the people these days when scientific knowledge is so widely spread. Indeed, without this we can hardly understand, much less meet the difficulties which are so rife with respect to some portions of the Sacred Volume. Who knows not Dr. Graebner's *God and the Cosmos*? Dr. Pieper knew more about aeronautics than any one I have met. The hobby of Dr. Krauss, the church historian, was photography.

Again, a knowledge of mental and moral philosophy is useful to a minister, both because of the insight into the principles and workings of man's nature, which he thus acquires, and also because some points in ethical theology are scarcely intelligible without it. So, again, history is of value to a pastor as giving him a wider insight into the actions of men and into the principles which govern human society than his own experience can possibly supply. The importance of classical scholarship to a theologian is too obvious to need more than a passing suggestion, so that a conference brother ought regard it a privilege when called upon to render an exegetical

paper. Yet, again, the value of music is very great, cultivating the imagination and the other more spiritual faculties of the mind as well as the affections of the heart. Lastly, I have no hesitation in saying that from the occasional perusal of some of the best works of fiction we ministers may derive benefit. Of course, all these secular studies should be strictly subsidiary to our sacred studies. And if time does not suffice, they should be without hesitation omitted.

And there is another caution. "Knowledge puffeth up." There is danger in literary knowledge and culture of assuming a tone of "show-off." Better, in my opinion, it would have been to have remained an honest dunce than to have become a conceited pedant. St. Paul was an eminently cultured man and used his knowledge with a master hand, but whatever learning or culture he had, he considered it, as well as everything else, "but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus," his Lord.

That leads us to the second part:

SACRED STUDY

Most admirably and fully does Dr. Th. Graebner cover this ground in his book *The Pastor as Student and Literary Worker*, which should be on the shelf of every member of the conference. And so, since I have been asked that this paper be brief, I would confine my further remarks to the special work which, as ministers, we have to do, the *magnum opus* of the study, the *sermon*.

Three particulars enter into the preparation of a sermon: 1. the choice of the subject; 2. the arrangement of the material; and 3. the expression, or writing, of it.

1

In regard to choice of subject and text: How thankful we should be for the Old Standard Pericopes, the time-honored Gospels and Epistles, which year by year direct our own and our people's attention upon all the most solemn subjects—doctrinal, historical, and practical—which it is the minister's duty to bring before his people. For many years I found my texts in these lessons and always found something "new" in the "old treasures." There is much to be said for this plan, especially in the earlier years of our ministry. It introduces a gentle compulsion, which saves us from the one-sided selec-

tion of a few favorite themes. But it does not abolish all difficulty. For it is not always possible to repeat this plan year after year. However, in all my sermons, printed and unprinted, I have always striven to follow the Pericopes, choosing my text either from or in accord with the Gospel or Epistle Lesson.

In the selection of these, commonly called "free texts," remember that a text is not something to be played with, to be twisted into a shape it was never meant to have, on which to show our originality or versatility. It behooves us, therefore, to be careful to observe its true position in the context, not to forcibly wrench it out of its proper connection.

Then, let not your choice fall on some fantastic, sensational text, though you need not mind taking a strange text now and then if you can make a fair use of it. Our people need solid food; the staple of our teaching must be that which supplies information from God's Word and leads them into deeper inquiry of the things of God and the soul, not merely to stir the feelings, to electrify. Such subjects soon lose their effect. The preaching that tells is that which expounds God's Word. Sermons should send men to their Bibles. Choose from the whole Book of God; for Old Testament prophecy and symbol furnish a marvelous enforcement and illustration of New Testament fact and truth.

Except in expository sermons, I think that short texts are as a rule to be preferred to long ones; only they must be complete in themselves, not mere fragments which do not convey the real meaning of the writer or the meaning which you intend to draw from them. A short text is remembered better. In a short text, too, there is likely to be one leading thought, and if you can fix one leading thought, one distinct lesson, in the minds of your hearers, it is as much as you can expect to do in one sermon.

Helpful may be the suggestion that the choice be not deferred. I know a member of this conference who, no matter how arduous the duties of the Lord's Day, never retired at ease without having fixed the text of the following Sunday. And a brother known to me often has his subjects and texts ready for six months in advance. Much precious time is often lost by hopelessly drifting about in search of a subject, perhaps in a fagged or exhausted moment, and then in sheer despair

choosing one that destroys the symmetry of our previous teaching and to which we do not bring the necessary inspiration. On the happy choice of a text more depends than we suppose, both for the quality of a sermon and the attention of the people. Begin well and soon, and you are halfway to the end.

2

Next in order comes the gathering and the arranging of the material. I presume to offer a few practical suggestions. As to the former, it is impossible to prescribe any process of routine. Different men collect their material in different ways. The same man, unless his mind works with extraordinary regularity, will go to work in different ways at different times. On one text, for instance, he will rightly consult commentaries and expositions; on another he will find his equipment in the Word itself, seen in the light which the Spirit has poured upon it through his own experiences of life and grace. All that we can say on this matter, in general, is that it is all-important that genuine material should be somehow collected.

How far is it essential that a sermon should be original? We put our feet on debatable ground in regard to the using of the works of others in preparing our sermons. It may be said of preachers, as Shakespeare said of poets, that "one poet is another's plagiary, and he a third's, till all end in Homer." As my good friend the sainted Director Klein of the Springfield Seminary once quaintly expressed it: "He could not help it that he was born after Dr. Walther and Dr. Stoeckhardt, who preached such admirable sermons that he could not keep himself from copying some of their material." I admit that in the course of a lengthy ministry I have preached some original sermons, not so many. I thank such men as Dr. Seiss, Gotwald, Bishop Charles Ryle, Guthrie, et alios, for having committed themselves to print to often aid my dull and stagnant mind. Spurgeon says: "When a pump has been long disused and will not work, you pour a little water down, and then it works." God has given to some, through the teaching of the Holy Spirit and through natural gifts, special wisdom and skill in the unfolding and presentation of His truth. And these treasures of exposition, when once in existence, become the perpetual treasure of the Church, and from them rich supplies should be drawn for each generation.

As to disregarding and neglecting what has been said by others, this seems to me to argue a culpable self-sufficiency. My advice in regard to this particular point is this: use copiously all good materials that are within your reach, but never use them to the exclusion of yourself. Make every thought you utter your own by rethinking it, by passing it through the crucible of your own mind. I have never regretted that I was instrumental in calling into being the *Concordia Pulpit* and frankly admit indebtedness to it. Do not fail to obtain the next volume. It will prove helpful.

Having chosen the material, the arrangement is highly important. Order is the sermon's first law as well as nature's. Let us grudge no time spent upon discovering the fittest order for our subject. This is the reason why sermons so often lack grip. What is said is good and true, but it fails to lay hold upon the mind of the hearer because the preacher has failed to grasp his own subject. It is indispensable that the preacher should see his sermon from end to end; his purpose should be clear throughout his discourse. It is not of much importance whether the structure of the sermon be analytical or synthetic; just so it is a real one. In other words, it must not be a collection of ideas, but an assemblage of thoughts which cohere together and arise out of one another. The mind of the hearer is then carried on from point to point, and each portion tends to strengthen the truth intended to be conveyed. It has been well said: "Without order in a sermon, a preacher cannot get into his subject, and without order he cannot get out of it." One great secret of power in attracting and keeping attention lies in arrangement.

Next I would speak a word as to the subject of illustrations. The power of illustration has, I find, been possessed by every great preacher from our blessed Lord downwards and should be carefully cultivated by those who seek to excel in their work. Such should be always on the lookout for material in nature and in life. In history, poetry, in fact, in all branches of reading you will find illustrative matter. In the newspapers, in your everyday contact with human beings, if your mind has grown into the habit of observation, you will be quick to find things that will strengthen your teaching in the pulpit. Of course, it must be strikingly in point and should not be too frequently inserted. Dr. Guthrie's sermons,

for instance, though eminently beautiful, possess too great an abundance of ornament. Metaphor is piled upon metaphor, image on image, story after story follows, until the truth of the text is obscured. (Then, too, there is a certain picturesque mode of putting things which is of value in fixing attention and making matters plain.) An old country parson once said to the writer: "We want the concrete here." We ought to bring as much of truth in the concrete into our discourses as may be.

We pass on to the third and last point of the presentation.

3

The text has been chosen; the material has been decided on; the subject must now be expressed to the people. How is this to be done?

The question between written and unwritten sermons here arises. I would dismiss it with the remark that while very few men can wisely dispense with writing in the early days of their ministry, it is my opinion that it is well for them to continue writing their sermons to the last. Writing promotes clearness of statement. It is a safeguard against irrelevancy. Writing not only stimulates thought, but it proves, clears, and compresses it. "The best master of the orator is the pen" is a true dictum.

There is one drawback to written sermons that we should try to counteract as far as possible. It is this, that they may savor of the study. We have to consider that we are preparing, not for the press, but for the pulpit, not material for the eye, but for the ear. There is a difference between successful writing and successful speaking. Perhaps the secret of success here is: never to lose sight of your congregation. Have the people always before you; strive to forget that you are seated at your study table and transport yourself into the pulpit and just write as if you were speaking to them then and there.

To come to the actual work of writing. The first matter to be attended to is the plan. What method shall we adopt? How divide? This will very much depend upon the kind of text you have selected. If it be topical, such as setting forth any Christian doctrine, your divisions will need to be clearly marked and follow in a natural and attractive order. If your subject be an historical one, you need not have any actual divisions at all, marking only those stages which the incident or episode affords ready to hand. And where clear divisions

are necessary, they need not always be mentioned. Sometimes the introduction of the words "first, secondly, thirdly" has a cold and deadening effect; the minds of the hearers readily mark the divisions of your subject without them. Sometimes, again, they are indispensable. But avoid too many divisions. Three should suffice in general. But the rule admits of exceptions.

A few hints as to the nature of our sermons. We live in days in which there is a cry for practical preaching. If we are to interpret this cry as the expression of a desire that we should bring our preaching to bear on the details of daily life, domestic, social, and commercial, on religion at home, in daily intercourse, and in business, the demand is a just one. And we should strive to meet it in the full conviction that the doctrine, precepts, and examples of the Bible enable us fully to do so. The religion of Jesus Christ is eminently adapted to our daily life. This is evident in the teaching of the Great Teacher and of His Apostles, from the Sermon on the Mount down to the last of the Epistles.

But it is to be feared that the cry for practical sermons has in too many cases another meaning. It is the utterance of a dislike of dogmatic teaching. It is a protest against distinctive truths; in a word, against theology, confessionalism. It means that belief is of small or no importance, and this ignores the fact that our practice must spring from our motives and that these motives must be furnished by the great truths of the Gospel. Let such doctrines as repentance, the inspiration of the Bible, justification by faith, the Second Coming of Christ, the efficacy of the means of grace have great pre-eminence and distinctiveness in your preaching.

One more hint as to the nature of the sermon. It is for us to watch, in an age of movement and turmoil, the currents of human thought and feeling, and to leaven and to guide them by proclaiming the great principles of truth and righteousness which God has committed to His Church. Our age has its special difficulties, tendencies, temptations. And we are not to be living on the traditions of the past and to be looking back to a golden age which was probably golden only in the present fond recollections; but we are to seek to serve our own present generation by trying to understand its needs and to meet them. If we believe, as we do, that Christianity is

divine, we may be sure that it has a mission and a message. It is for us to witness to the changeless amid the changing, and to the permanent amid the perishable. Men's hearts are the same in every age, and it is for us to help them in their daily battle with sin and sorrow and unbelief. "Go ye and preach the Gospel" is the standing charge of the divine Master. At the same time we shall take care that we live in the present and not in the past. The Gospel, indeed, never changes, but different ages need to have it presented in a different form and call for the special pre-eminence of different doctrines. To this end let us study men, newspapers, magazines, and all that will show us what our people and our time are thinking about. Relevancy and opportuneness add great power to pastoral preaching.

In conclusion: We have been dwelling — if I may so term it — upon the mechanics of the sermon. Let us ever remember that the best sermons are those that are watered by prayer. "Bene orasse est bene studuisse." The highest type of a preacher is the man who gives himself to prayer. We must pray that we may be emptied of ourselves, that we may be stripped of all vanity, prejudice, prepossession, and anything that may hinder the free operation of God's divine power in our minds and hearts. The desire to show off, to be thought educated, to be considered eloquent, to vie with some other preacher, all this is fatal to the delivery of a message from God. One of the greatest preachers who ever lived (Augustine) gives us this exhortation: "In everything maintain a stronger reliance on prayer than on thine own industry and labor." The sermon that is begun, continued, and ended in this frame of mind will be the sermon that God will bless.

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