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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

WHAT IS A SERMON ?

by NEIL GREGOR SMITH

THOSE who are concerned with the public proclamation of the Word of God will find help in this study of some practical aspects of preaching. The author is Librarian in Knox College, Toronto.

EVER since St. Paul wrote about "the foolishness of preaching" people have been expressing alarm and concern over the place of the sermon in the work and witness of the church. In the last century causes for concern over the sermon have been multiplied. The pulpit has more competitors for the attention of our people than it has ever had. A hundred years ago the best public speaking that most people heard was heard in the church. This is no longer true. In their own homes, through radio and television, our people are accustomed to hearing the trained voices of actors and public speakers who have expended far more pains in attempting to learn the art of speaking well than the average minister. In most theological seminaries instruction in the preparation and delivery of sermons receives far less attention than the subject deserves. We lavish years of study in learning *what* to say, and expend little effort in learning *how* to say it. For effective communication the *how* may be almost as important as the *what*.

It may be admitted that preaching, like acting, is an art in which there is much to be learned and little that can be taught. Trying to learn how to write a sermon is like trying to learn how to write a sonnet. The techniques involved in the writing of a sonnet are fairly simple. When we have acquired a knowledge of these techniques it does not follow that we can turn out sonnets of Shakespearean quality at will. There is a spark of creativity required for the writing of a sonnet or a sermon, and the element of creativity is not transferable. At the same time it must be recognized that neither a good sonnet nor a good sermon is likely to be composed without a working knowledge of the techniques involved.

Even though we have been hearing sermons since childhood, and preaching them—perhaps too many of them—ourselves, it helps to focus attention on the techniques involved in preaching to ask

what a sermon is supposed to be. In what respects does a sermon differ from an essay delivered orally? In what respects does the exposition of a scriptural passage in a sermon differ from an exposition in a written commentary? What is a sermon expected to accomplish? In short, what is a sermon?

The dictionaries do not help us very much in attempting to answer the question. The *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* defines a sermon as "something that is said; talk, discourse": more specifically as "a discourse, usually delivered from a pulpit, and based upon a text of scripture, for the purpose of religious instruction or exhortation". It is added that the word is used contemptuously for "a long, tedious discourse or harangue". The verb "to preach" is defined as meaning, "to proclaim by public discourse". It is added that there is a secondary meaning: "To give moral or religious advice in an obtrusive or tiresome way". One of the perils of the preacher's calling is that what is supposed to be the proclamation of truth by public discourse can degenerate into the giving of advice in obtrusive and tiresome ways, in tedious discourses and harangues.

The first hall-mark of a sermon is that it is a means of communication through public discourse. It is a means of communication through the spoken word. It was through the medium of the spoken word, with all its perils and pitfalls, that our Lord intended His gospel to be proclaimed. He was reared among a people who had a high regard for the written word, but He did not commit His teaching to writing. He took far less pains to ensure the preservation of the exact form of His pronouncements than Mary Baker Eddy took to preserve the exact form of her teachings on science and health. His chosen method for the perpetuation of His work was to choose twelve men that they might be with Him, and that He might send them forth to teach and to preach. They were to be witnesses to Him in Jerusalem, and Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth. To the uttermost parts of the earth His gospel has been carried, through the foolishness of preaching.

The sermon, then, is a medium of communication, through which the convictions, the faith, and the zeal of dedicated men are transmitted to others. While it is a chosen medium for the communication of Christian truth it is not the sole medium. Art and music, in skilled and dedicated hands, have conveyed various aspects of Christian truth to generation after generation. Francis Thompson's *Hound of Heaven* conveys through poetry a message

which has been the theme of many a sermon. Men have felt awed and stirred after hearing Handel's *Messiah*. The combination of words and music has an emotional and aesthetic appeal which cannot be conveyed by words alone. The architecture of churches, the symbolism of wood and stone, the glorious colouring of stained glass, convey truth and stir emotion by non-verbal forms. The radio-talk, the religious drama, the printed message in book or tract may convey Christian truth to an audience which would not hear it otherwise. There may be some things which we can actually say more effectively through these media than through the sermon. But the fact remains that the sermon is a chosen medium for the communication of Christian truth.

The life of the church has been enriched by the labours of saints and scholars and apologists, but it has owed most of its strength, under God, to the succession of its preachers. Chrysostom and Ambrose, Savonarola, Jonathan Edwards, Phillips Brooks, a great multitude that no man can number, whose voices were not heard in the great congregations, bore their witness in their generations through the ministry of the spoken word. By such witness the church lives. It managed to exist for seventeen hundred years without the Sunday School. It struggled on for another century or more without some of the organizations and societies which seem important in its life now. No alterations in a changing social pattern should tempt us to neglect the historic fact that it has pleased God through the folly of preaching to save them that believe.

The sermon, then, should be recognized as a unique and distinctive medium for the communication of Christian truth. Like every other medium of communication it has its advantages and its limitations, assets and liabilities which are inseparably associated with its distinctive form.

One of the distinctive features of the sermon, as a medium of communication, is that it is a message inseparable from the personality of the messenger. The printed word is relatively independent of the personality of the author. The printed message stands on its own merits.

Theoretically the truth contained in a sermon should be equally independent of the personality of the preacher. Actually the truth of a sermon is bound up with the personality of the person preaching. In any public discourse the personality of the person speaking is part of the message delivered. Long ago the Roman orators defined an orator as "a good man skilled in speaking". The

emphasis should be upon the adjective *good*. In any situation in which a man addresses his fellows face to face it is not only his words that are weighed in the judgment of his hearers. It is the whole character of the man speaking. His humility or arrogance, his sincerity or hypocrisy, affect the reception of his message.

Aristotle noted that there is a form of persuasion produced by the impression made by the "ethos" of the speaker:

The character (*ethos*) of the speaker is a cause of persuasion when the speech is so uttered as to make him worthy of belief; for as a rule we trust men of probity more, and more quickly, about things in general, while on points outside the realm of exact knowledge, where opinion is divided, we trust them absolutely . . . we might almost affirm that the speaker's character (*ethos*) is the most potent of all the means of persuasion.¹

Elsewhere he gives this analysis of a speaker's ethos:

As for the speakers themselves, the sources of our trust in them are three, for apart from the arguments, there are three things that gain our belief, namely, intelligence, character and good will. Speakers are untrustworthy in that they say or advise, from one or more of the following causes: either through want of intelligence they form wrong opinions; or while they form correct opinions, their rascality leads them to say what they do not think; or while intelligent and honest enough, they are not well disposed (to the audience) and so, perchance, will fail to advise the best course, though they see it. That is a complete list of the possibilities. It necessarily follows that a speaker who is thought to have all these qualities (intelligence, character and good will) has the confidence of his hearers.²

In preaching this element, the "ethos" or personal authority of the speaker is particularly important. A man's zeal for the truth proclaimed, or his indifference to it, are manifested in his bearing, as well as in his words. It is only the man who takes heed to himself, who tries in sincerity to live out the gospel he proclaims, who can be trusted to take heed to the flock over which he has been made an overseer. It is only the man who takes heed to himself, who has sorrowed for his sins and repented of them, and who has known in his own soul the struggle between doubt and faith, between inclination and duty, who can effectively persuade others to embrace the truth he proclaims.

A second distinctive feature of the sermon as a means of communication, is that it is a form of communication through the spoken word. The sermon is not an essay delivered orally. There is a far greater difference than most of us realize between literary English and spoken English. The average minister, after being

¹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, I. ii. 3.

² *Ibid*, II. i. 6.

subjected in university and college to a long academic training, is inclined to use the literary, rather than the spoken usage, in his sermons. We do not have to unlearn what we have learned, but it should be recognized that the conversational style of spoken English is best adapted for pulpit use. The short sentence, the simple word, the conversational level of discourse contribute to ease of comprehension. The prophet stated that the Lord God had given him the tongue of the learned that he might speak a word in season to him that was weary. The tongue of the learned is not given us that we may deliver "learned" sermons, for the display of erudition. It is given to us that we may instruct and comfort, and speak a word in season to folk who are hard pressed in the struggles of life.

The use of the spoken word is difficult to master. Even Demosthenes found it difficult. His first attempts to speak in public were far from successful. He had, Plutarch tells us, "a certain weakness of voice and indistinctness of speech and shortness of breath which disturbed the sense of what he said by disjoining his sentences". Through patience and persistent efforts he overcame his handicaps. The success he achieved is an encouragement to all who labour to improve their style of speaking.

St. Augustine, who had been trained in the pagan schools of rhetoric, faced the problem of the employment of its art in Christian teaching. It was recognized that rhetoric had frequently been used to serve unworthy purposes, but since it could be used to propagate truth as well as falsehood, "it is not the faculty itself which is to be blamed, but the perversity of those who put it to bad use". It was not reasonable that truth should take its stand unarmed when the principles of rhetoric were available for its assistance. Why, he asked, should men who try to persuade others to embrace falsehood "tell their falsehoods briefly, clearly and plausibly", while the champions of truth proclaim their message in such a way that it is "tedious to listen to, hard to understand, and in fine, not easy to believe it?"³ Christian opinion has followed St. Augustine in holding that the Christian message, being eminently worth telling, should be told as well as human skill can tell it.

While the subjects of pulpit discourse are such as have intrinsic interest, and while sermons are delivered under circumstances as favourable as possible, speech from the pulpit labours under certain handicaps. As Hugh Blair pointed out, the minister's subjects:

³ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, IV. 2.

are noble and important, but they are also "trite and familiar".

They have for ages employed so many speakers and so many pens : the public ear is so much accustomed to them, that it requires more than ordinary power of genius to fix attention. Nothing within the reach of art is more difficult than to bestow on what is common the grace of novelty. No sort of composition is such a trial of skill as where the merit of it lies wholly in the execution ; not in giving any information that is new, nor in convincing men of what they did not believe: but in dressing truths which they knew and of which they were before convinced, in such colours as may most forcibly affect their imagination and heart. To do this, to bestow on what is common the grace of novelty, to present old and familiar truths in new garb, to move the will to the performance of known duties, is one of the difficult aspects of the art of preaching.⁴

The multitude of tongues and pens which have been employed on the themes of pulpit discourse since Hugh Blair wrote have added strength to his argument.

The ancient rhetoricians, who knew a good deal about the problems of communication through the spoken word, held that all public discourse has three objectives; to interest or please, and so gain attention, to teach or give instruction, and to move or persuade.

Unless we have the interest of our hearers we cannot reach any of our objectives. We can neither teach nor move people whose attention has wandered from the subject we are discussing. When Dr. Johnson was telling of an evening spent in the company of Wilkes he said that Wilkes had started talking about the conspiracy of Catiline. "Whereupon", he said, "I withdrew my attention and thought of Tom Thumb". It is not unknown for people sitting in church to withdraw their attention to think of a thousand things that are far removed from the subject of the discourse.

We should not be too ready to attribute lack of interest in our sermons to the spiritual poverty or the mental incompetence of our people. Part of the fault may lie with our method of presentation. Even in church, under the most favourable conditions, there are factors which compete for attention in the minds of our people. Physical weariness, mental preoccupation, pressing anxieties, the distraction of accidents which happen in large gatherings—any of these can distract interest from the sermon. St. Paul presumably preached with conviction and eloquence, but on at least one occasion a young man named Eutychus fell asleep during his sermon.

⁴ Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric*, Lecture XIX.

The fault may have been partly with St. Paul (he was long in preaching that time!) and partly with Eutychus. A risk of distractions is run by all who speak in public. Recognizing all this we have the obligation of attempting to present our message in a way which is most likely to hold the interest of those who hear us.

The sermon is intended to teach as well as interest. The teaching element in the sermon is intended to confirm, explain, or demonstrate the truth presented. We attempt to present a particular truth or a particular obligation in as favourable a light as possible, with the most convincing arguments and the most persuasive evidence we can muster. The choice of our illustrations, the development of our argument, the presentation of evidence from reason, scripture, history or experience is determined by this objective of giving instruction in support of the truth we present.

A third objective of the sermon is to move, to secure an alteration of thought, decision, or action, on the basis of the plea presented. One of the indirect tributes paid to the preaching of John the Baptist is that the people, after hearing him, asked, "What shall we do?" They were not left in a vague state of emotional disturbance in which they might be disposed to say, "Something should be done!" or, "Someone should do something!" They were brought to the point of decision where they were asking what *they* should do. John had a definite prescription to offer them. After Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost there was a similar reaction. The people came asking what they should do. "When they heard this they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2: 37). Again there was the urge to action, and again there was a definite prescription offered them as to what they should do. "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ." Not all sermons, not even all apostolic sermons, had such happy results, but one of the purposes of preaching is that there should be such results.

The sermon is a unique and distinctive form of communication also as a discourse addressed to a worshipping people. The sermon has its setting in a service of worship, in the atmosphere of worship. It is addressed to a group of listening people who have gathered to worship God and hear what He would speak. It is a mixed audience, representing people of all ages, from all walks of life, in various stages of spiritual development. Our message must have some relevance to the situation in which they find themselves, the problems they have, the sorrows they bear, the

temptations they encounter. They should be able to hear in our message from the Word of God a word which speaks to them. When St. Bernard was delivering his sermons on the Song of Songs he explained that his purpose was not to explain words but to influence hearts. Our sermons may sometimes be expositions of a psalm or a parable, but again their primary purpose is not to explain words but to influence hearts. An American critic was amused at a headline which the *Manchester Guardian* once gave to an account of rioting in Indonesia. There had been riots in which scores had been killed, and hundreds injured. The *Guardian's* headline read: "Manchester Man Injured Abroad". Whatever the critics may say the man who wrote the headline knew his business. The point of interest for the people in Manchester in the riots in Indonesia was something that had happened to a man from Manchester. They would read about scenes of violence that had taken place far away to find out what happened to the man from Manchester.

In precisely the same way the minister has to "slant" a universal message to attract the interest of a particular group of people. The text may be concerned with the Jebusites, the Amorites, or the Hittites, with patriarchs and prophets who lived long ago and far away, but the sermon is "slanted" to show the bearing of all this upon the man from Manchester, or Chicago, or Toronto.

The *Westminster Directory for Public Worship* points out that the minister, in preaching, is not to rest in general doctrine, but is to bring it home to special use by application to his hearers, in such a manner that they "may feel the Word of God to be quick and powerful, a discoverer of the thoughts and intents of the heart". This touches upon the factor which, above all others, makes the sermon a distinctive medium of communication—the fact that the sermon can be a medium of revelation. The *Shorter Catechism* states also that the Spirit of God makes the reading and especially the preaching of the Word "an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation" (Answer to Question 89). The miracle of preaching is that through the foolishness of preaching God does sometimes speak to His people.

When we stand up to preach there is sometimes a miracle that is like a repetition of the feeding of the multitude in the wilderness. We are commanded to give them to eat, and we have nothing of ourselves. We are involved in the same perplexities, sorrows, failures, and temptations, as those to whom we minister. We are

men of unclean lips, dwelling in the midst of a people of unclean lips. But as we attempt to break the loaves in our hands, the miracle sometimes happens, and the hungry are fed. Its happening is not altogether dependent upon us. We cannot command it, and sometimes we cannot tell when it has happened. That it does happen, that God speaks to His people through our faltering words and stammering tongues, is the wonder and the mystery and the miracle of preaching.

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