

The Formal Aspect of Preaching

by John C. Jeske

Every seven days hundreds of thousands of church members spend an hour in a worship service. A large segment of this hour is taken up by the sermon.

Many in the church are honestly convinced that the sermon has seen its day, that new methods of communicating the gospel must be sought for the worshipers of our day. The result has been liturgical experimentation on a scale previously unknown. Who has not heard of dialog sermons and of audio-visual presentation supplementing (and sometimes supplanting) the sermon?

Even in those church bodies that have retained the structure of the common service with the sermon occupying a position of prominence one recognizes more than occasional stirrings of discontent with preaching. More than just occasionally one hears comments like: "He's good as a pastor, but he can't preach." Helmut Thielecke has commented:

Our preaching is, to be sure, largely correct, exegetically "legitimate," workmanlike, and tidy; but it is also remarkably dead and lacking in infectious power. Very often it strikes us as an unreal phantom that hovers above and is isolated from what people feel are the actual realities of their life and what they talk about in their language. There can be no doubt that for many preachers it is simply an escape when, in the face of this failure to get returns in the area of preaching, they take flight into the cultivation of liturgical ceremonial and even make a virtue of the vice of wanting to ignore the times and live in some timeless, spiritual world.¹

If there is truth to Thielecke's observation (and I suspect that more of us would be inclined to admit this than would dismiss his opinion summarily), then the improving of our preaching has to be a matter of continuing concern to each of us. It is no secret that there are several great threats to the Christian pulpit today. The first is posed by liberal preachers who rip Christianity to shreds. The other danger, a very real one, is posed by evangelical preachers whose sermons are characterized by a tiresome mediocrity. Spurgeon is credited with having advised a group of students: "If you preach the truth in a dull, monotonous style God may bless it, but in all probability He will not."

The topic assigned for this article focuses attention on the formal aspect of preaching, in contrast to the material aspect. On the following pages, therefore, the stress is on the *how* of preaching, not on the *what* of preaching. These lines can do no more, but hopefully no less, than to sketch some basic considerations which the preacher must bear in mind as he approaches his sacred work at his study desk and in his pulpit.

I

If the sermon is to glorify God and to edify God's people, *it must be clear*. This means that the preacher has to strive for a logically structured outline. The shape an animal has is pretty largely determined by the shape of his skeleton. The outline of a sermon will go a long way toward determining the logic (or illogic) of the sermon.

After the preacher has finished his text study, before he even begins to write the sermon, he has to answer certain basic questions: "What is the heart of what I want to say? What, precisely, do I hope to accomplish with this sermon? And how do I get there?"

Ideally, the sermon's central idea, or theme, should summarize the subdivisions or parts of the sermon. These, in turn, are the main truths that the preacher has distilled from hours of text study. It is inexcusable, and

¹ Helmut Thielecke, *Encounter with Spurgeon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), p 2.

logically indefensible, to formulate a sermon outline whose parts are merely a restatement of the theme. The parts must divide the theme and exhaust it, at least within the limits set by the text.

To insure that the sermon will be clear, the preacher will need to bear in mind that the sermon is to be *heard*, not *read*, by the hearers. For the hearer, each sentence the pastor speaks has gone into the past before the next is spoken. What the hearer doesn't grasp instantly is lost for good. A person reading a book can go back and re-read a sentence or a paragraph; the person listening to a sermon can't do that.

H. Grady Davis, in his *Design for Preaching*, has this perceptive evaluation of some preaching:

It may seem childishly simple to say that every sermon consists of only two things: what is talked about, and what is said about it. To say it is indeed simple; to act on it must be very difficult, judging by the evidence. A man who has been to college and seminary, a man who has preached for years, can speak as if he never heard of this primary fact. Sometimes he proposes a subject and then wanders away from it. Sometimes he drags in many other things that do not belong to the subject. Sometimes he seems to be talking about several subjects at once, indiscriminately. Sometimes he just talks about this and that and the other in such a way as to create the suspicion that he either has no subject at all or, if he feels one looming at the back of his head, does not himself know for sure what it is.²

After the pastor has finished his text study, he has a picture of God that he wants to convey to his hearers. But the hearers obviously cannot see the total picture as it is in the preacher's mind. He sees the whole picture, but he can't transfer it in its entirety to his hearers at once. It's as though in the sermon he were handing people pieces of a jig-saw puzzle one at a time. A logical outline is an indispensable element in this weekly homiletical pilgrimage into the truths of God's Word.

During the course of a 20-minute sermon the preacher throws out several thousand words, several hundred statements. If these are to convey the truth of the text to the hearer so that he gets a clear picture, the *preacher's language must be simple*.

It is easy for a preacher to live in his own private world of thought and experience. Immersed in a semi-religious realm, he may to his hearers seem to use a strange language spoken only in churches and by preachers. Some time ago 25 church members of average education were asked to list words and phrases they had often heard from preachers but did not understand. In the list were "dayspring," "husbandman," "heir of salvation," "washed in the blood," "balm of Gilead," "things of the flesh." Used in context and with proper explanation, these expressions have their place. Used as isolated phrases, they contribute little to the hearer's comprehension.

Every preacher wants to be clear. But preachers, being human, are tempted to take the easy way out. And one of the most appealing shortcuts in sermonizing is to bypass the difficult job of explaining the difficult concept, the abstract idea. How much easier it is to say "Jesus brings us salvation" than to go the extra effort of defining "salvation." But how much more helpful to people it will be if we do define. By "salvation" do we mean "deliverance from the *guilt* of sin?" If that's what we mean, wouldn't it be better to say it? Or if our text defines "salvation" as "rescue from the *power* of sin," why not say it that way? Or perhaps by using the term "salvation" we're referring specifically to the Christian's ultimate deliverance from the very *presence* of sin. If so, then wouldn't it be clearer to say that?

When hearers know what the preacher is talking about, when they understand his point of reference, what he says makes sense and they can follow. But surely you have already listened to a poorly designed sermon, and what an unhappy experience that is! You understood everything the preacher was saying, but you couldn't see how it all added up. You had to ask yourself repeatedly: "What is the man trying to tell me?" After the sermon was over you could probably have repeated a number of statements the preacher made, but you'd have been hard put to say what the sermon was about.

² H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), p 26.

The fault with that sermon may have been that the *preacher did not generalize*. The sermon simply went from one human interest item to another; it dealt in trifles; it majored in minors. Davis points out that a generalization sees a large truth at a single glance. Its purpose is to unify a number of concrete but unrelated facts, to pull them together as a unit of meaning.³

Good thinking, however, never remains general for too long. *It moves to particulars*. After the preacher announces the general truths he has gained from his study of the text, he must move to the particulars. He must present the concrete details in such a way as to help his hearer experience that reality for himself.

Poor preaching may fall into either of two opposite faults: It may move too exclusively among particulars and never tie the particulars into adequate generalizations. Conversely, it may consist too exclusively of . . . vague, fuzzy generalities—one general assertion after the other, from which nothing stands out as more important than the rest.⁴

A well-designed sermon offers a “woof of particulars on a warp of clear generalizations.”

Break down a sermon into its component parts, and what do you have? A central thought or theme, which is the idea of the sermon, and two or three major truths that the text has to say about the central thought. These have been elevated to the rank of major parts of the sermon outline. The rest of the sermon is merely development of those major parts.

This development is another make-or-break point of good sermonizing. A good preacher is more likely than a mediocre one to state explicitly and clearly the particular point he’s making, and to put that statement in a prominent position. *Good sermon development makes large use of restatement*. The hearers don’t have a manuscript of the sermon to follow, and they get only one chance to hear each sentence. If the thought of a sentence is too difficult to grasp with one hearing, and the next sentence builds on the concept of the first, there is a logical gap that the hearer may be unable to bridge. Important thoughts must therefore be restated in other words, in more particular words.

Luther once described a good speaker as one whom, when he has finished speaking, has enabled you to say, “This and this and this is what he said.” In other words, then, it’s not the man who knows much who’s the best preacher, but the man who knows how to express what he knows so that others may learn it. The sermon’s major parts ought to capsulize the big truths you have distilled from your sermon text after a week of study. Your hearers ought to have recognized those truths and made them their own before they leave church. One or two major thoughts impressed on the mind will surely be more helpful to the hearer than fifty pious thoughts expressed during the course of the sermon. One ten-penny nail driven home has more holding power than a whole boxful of thumbtacks.

If the preacher’s message is to be clear, the sermon outline must be logical, the sermon development clearly organized, and the sermon language carefully chosen for its clarity.

II

According to Thielecke, Spurgeon once said: “I have no right to attention unless I know how to command it.” If the preacher can put the truth before Christian people in a *clear* manner, they will be able to receive and to remember it. If in addition the preacher can put the truth before Christian people in an *interesting* manner, they will be much more likely to receive it and to remember it.

No one can disagree that the sermon ought to be clear as well as interesting. But the moment a preacher seeks to describe for others what makes for interesting sermons he’s in an area where the subjective element bulks large.

³ Davis, *op. cit.*, p 245.

⁴ Davis, *op. cit.*, p 247.

If a sermon is to be interesting to the hearers, it must *reflect the preacher's deep concern for his hearers*. The preacher has not been called by God to pass out ice cubes Sunday after Sunday. If delivering the sermon is for him an academic or professional exercise, or if he's more concerned about getting through the sermon than about serving the deepest needs of God's people, his hearers will sense this and will tune him out. The preacher's pulpit manner and message must convince people that he is for them. The preacher will cultivate the ability to isolate each individual in the congregation and to make him feel the sermon is addressed directly to him.

When we preach, can our hearers detect a beating heart of sympathy with them in their difficult task of living for Christ in a topsy-turvy world? Do we speak words of advice and warning as though from serene heights to those struggling and sinning below, or can our hearers recognize that their preacher, too, has needs and failures and disappointments, but that he knows—and wants them to know—whence our help cometh?

When we preach against sin, does our tone lead people to think, "Go on pastor, give it to 'em!" Surely the preacher dare not give the impression of delighting in condemning sin. Condemning sin must be a part of every sermon we preach, but it is always a painful process; the pastor knows he has to hurt people before he can help them, and hurting people is neither easy nor pleasant.

Interesting sermons meet people where they are, not where we imagine they are or where we would like them to be. My sermon may be doctrinally correct and still not touch the heart of the hearer if he feels it's isolated from the actual realities of day-to-day life. Some time ago the British Broadcasting Corporation surveyed the audiences for its religious broadcasts. Perhaps not surprisingly, the reason for listening to the broadcasts varied with the age groups. People over 65 listened because they found the broadcasts "comforting." People between 50 and 65 endorsed this, but a close second was the view that the broadcasts helped them cope with daily life. People between 30 and 50 gave almost equal weight to these two reasons and to a third, that religious broadcasts "helped them to understand what Christianity means." Among the under-30's (and this, in America, constitutes more than half of the population) the desire for assistance in understanding Christianity was, by an ample margin, the reason most commonly given.

When God reached out to rescue a world of sinners, He met men where they were. The eternal and infinite God clothed Himself in human form to deliver us. Wherever Jesus went and with whomever He spoke, we can—even at a distance of 20 centuries—sense the personableness, the human touch, which underlay all His words and actions.

Interesting sermons have this same human quality about them. The preacher is God's ambassador to his generation. He's a friend of the Bridegroom. Through his feeble lips God makes a proposal, a proposal through which He seeks to win a Bride, to live with Him for all eternity. The preacher speaks words through which the Savior wins people's hearts.

Let the preacher who wants to preach interestingly give his sermons a personality check. Do they speak warmly and winsomely of the Savior's amazing mercy? Do they show that the preacher is making an effort to be engaging in his approach to his hearers? Just as one can be bored in the presence of certain people, so it is possible to be bored in the middle of a sermon. What a poor commentary on the Savior's loving invitation I supply if my pulpit manner and message are too professional, perhaps even matter-of-fact and impersonal. The style that a chemist uses in describing a laboratory experiment will simply not do for the same man when he is writing a letter to his wife and children. Arturo Toscanini used to interrupt rehearsals of the New York Philharmonic and cry in his broken English: "Give something! Put some blood in!" Interesting preaching is warm with blood. The loving involvement of the preacher with those who hear his message will be readily apparent to, and will be warmly received by, a grateful congregation.

If the sermon is to reach its objective, the hearer must be involved in the sermon's development every step of the way. Every preacher has wrestled with the question: What's the best way to involve the hearer? Well, what is the best way? Lecture to him? It's pretty generally agreed that the lecture method isn't the best for holding the hearer's interest. The interesting sermon will therefore not be in the nature of an oration.

Perhaps the etymology of the word "homiletics" can help us here. The Greek *ὁμιλεῖν* means, "to be in a company or crowd" (*ὁμιλία*); hence "to talk," "to converse." In Luke 24:15 it's used of the Emmaus disciples'

talking to each other; in Acts 20:11 of Paul's discussion with a number of people. Accordingly, then, preaching is actually elevated conversation. If the sermon is not to turn into a monologue, the preacher must strive manfully to *involve his hearers in the conversation*.

To see a masterful example of this, recall Jesus' answer to the scribe who asked: "Who is my neighbor?" First, Jesus did not give a dogmatic answer that had to be acknowledged as true. ("Your neighbor is anyone who needs the sharing of your love.") Instead He told an unforgettable story about the Good Samaritan. Now note how Jesus involved the scribe: "Which now of these three, *thinkest thou*, was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?" (Lk 10:36). Jesus knew very well that truth is not dependent for its validity on man's acknowledgement of it. But He also realized that for truth to have meaning for a man it must come home to him personally, meeting him in his own situation and in his own mind and heart.

The preacher who wants to preach interesting sermons will learn to *speak and to write in pictures*. Think of the pictures that make Christ's sermons so colorful and so clear—the homemaker's yeast and grapes on a vine and a light under a bushel and whitewashed tombstones and a log in your eye! Every preacher needs to cultivate a preference for sensuous words, words that convey sensory images. "Apple blossoms" conjures up a better picture than "flowers"; "trials and tribulations" simply cannot compare with Churchill's "blood, sweat, toil, and tears."

To note how vivid language can be, it's instructive to consult the language's colloquialisms. Note the sensuous images which leap to the mind when a person is described as "all thumbs," or as "having hair on her teeth," or as "giving a left-handed compliment," or as having "a short fuse." "He fell flat on his face" is surely more graphic than "he failed miserably." The interesting preacher speaks in pictures, pictures dipped out of the everyday lives of his hearers. The preacher will do well to cultivate a preference for the strong, descriptive verb. "Jesus said" is not as clear or as interesting as "Jesus warned," "Jesus promised," "Jesus pleaded," "Jesus threatened," "Jesus explained."

Henry A. Gleason, Jr., in an article "Linguistics in the Service of the Church," quotes an interesting observation of Prof. Ford Battles: "Theology is making verbs into nouns; preaching is putting them back into verbs." Gleason offers this perceptive comment:

Theologians talk about "creation, providence, redemption." These have a comprehensive, universal ring, but quite lack the immediacy of the preacher's affirmation: "God creates, God provides, God was in Christ redeeming." And generally the Bible sides with the preacher. The Indo-European tongues stand out among the thousands in the world for the ease with which they express actions by nouns: creation, providence, redemption—thus pushing off (commonly into oblivion) the question: Who did? To whom? For nouns do not have subjects and objects, as verbs do.⁵

The interesting preacher, wherever possible, *speaks in specifics rather than in generalities*. Expressions like "the world," "the things of this world" don't register immediately with people who must visualize a concept before they can act on it. "The love of God" is an ambiguous expression. The hearer must immediately ask himself: Does he mean God's love for me or my love for God? "The kingdom of God" is another expression that does not without proper definition create a clear image for the hearer. Is the preacher using the word in its original sense of "God's gracious reign in the hearts of men," or in the metonymical sense of "the church"?

Antiques have their place, but the pulpit is not that place. The preacher who wants to preach interestingly will *cultivate a preference for familiar words*. "God would have us believe," with all of its hoary precedent, is simply not the English spoken by people today. "It behooves us" is inferior to "we ought." "God intends" registers with people; "God purposes" does not. Words like "glorious," "manifest," and "manifold" may seem to have a patina about them which is supposed to endear them to the hearer, but the issues of life and death are too critical for our hearers to be obscured by language that may once have been clear but is no longer.

⁵ *Practical Anthropology*, IX (Sept-Oct 1962), 205-219.

Interesting sermons are full of illustrations—not necessarily anecdotes, but concrete comparisons and examples that clarify and support some point the preacher is trying to develop. A specific instance that you have learned from the Scripture or from your own observation and which has become part of your own thought is preferable to a canned illustration (often apocryphal, shopworn, and second-rate). If the preacher does choose to use an anecdote, let him be sure it illustrates the point he is making. An unrelated “illustration” which doesn’t illustrate calls attention to itself, sidetracks the hearer, and confuses him.

The 20-minute time limit under which most of our preaching is done suggests another consideration for the pastor who wants to preach interesting sermons. With so much to say in so little time, the perceptive preacher will measure his words and sentences. He learns to express himself in as few words as possible, for he knows that most sentences can be improved by cutting out a fourth of their words, perhaps one-half. “Never use two words where one will do the job adequately” must be the rule. Every word that can be spared is in the way, blurs the line, overloads and distracts the hearer’s attention.

In communication, the name of the game is *two eyes to two eyes*. According to one psychologist, the factors producing the total impact of a spoken message are 55% facial (38% vocal, and 7% verbal). Now one may quarrel with the percentages, but all must agree that the hearer’s response to the message is going to be conditioned to a large degree by the earnestness and enthusiasm (or lack of it) reflected by the speaker’s eyes and face. Personal conversations are heart-to-heart and face-to-face discussions. The pastor’s conversation with his flock will be no less personal.

Can you imagine Peter preaching his Pentecost sermon from notes, or Paul checking with his manuscript when addressing the Ephesian elders at Miletus? What young woman would take a man as her husband who read his proposal of marriage to her?

Those who argue for the use of a manuscript in the pulpit often plead poor memory as justification. The real culprit, however, may be a poorly designed sermon, whose central idea is not clearly thought out and properly expressed. It seems to this observer that the preacher who consults a manuscript in the pulpit (for purposes other than reading his text or proof passages) is signaling something to the congregation that he ought not be signaling. He may be saying: “I don’t know what to say to you now so I’d better look.” Or he may be saying: “I didn’t consider this sermon important enough to learn it all in one piece. After all, a man ought not overwork his memory.” Or he may be saying: “As I stand here before you, my immediate and prime concern is *to make it through this sermon* as I have it written.” None of these is flattering to the people of God whom he is serving on behalf of God.

It is undoubtedly better to forget some things we had planned to say than to run the risk of having the magnetic cord of sympathetic interest broken by reading instead of speaking. The preacher who preaches without notes will develop into a more logical preacher. And surely there is no better way for the preacher to gain the good will of the congregation than by looking at them as he talks with them about the important matters suggested by the text. Most hearers, I suspect, would rather hear an ordinary talker than a good reader.

The preacher’s spiritual knowledge, but also the means of its communication, are entrusted talents. Every preacher ought to recognize that his pulpit mannerisms may very well stand in the way of his message. A monotonous delivery, unpleasant facial expression, a constantly clenched fist or pointed finger can lessen the congregation’s willingness to listen, and can produce a deadly boredom. Anyone who has ever heard a brother intone his sermon with a pompous voice or a pulpit whine has had the feeling: “If that man would only listen to himself and hear how he sounds!” An artificial voice, a voice that is not the preacher’s natural conversational voice, is out of place in the pulpit. There ought to be an air of truth about the Christian minister.

This might be an appropriate place for a commercial from the seminary’s homiletics department. Several years ago a generous gift enabled the seminary to acquire videotape equipment. All student preachers and catechists are videotaped during their class presentations and have the opportunity to hear and see themselves in action. (To a man, students admit it’s a humbling experience.) The seminary would like to make the benefits of this equipment available to our pastors. One course offering of the 1974 summer quarter of studies (entitled “Preaching Laboratory”) has been designed to accomplish this.

A recent issue of this journal contained an article on glossolalia. There is a gift of tongues all of us should covet, a gift that, too, is the Spirit's gift, and that is the gift of speaking in clear English. How each of us ought to pray God to bless our Scripture study and our sermon work, so that the truths of God that we present Sunday for Sunday are logically organized, and simply and interestingly presented. For then, surely, sinners will be saved, saints will be edified, and God will be glorified.