

PREACHING CHRIST
LECTURE 4
VARIATION: DIFFERENT KINDS OF SERMONS

INTRODUCTION

If all your sermons were gathered together into one pie, and then organised into category slices, how many slices would there be, and how big or small would each slice be?

In this lecture I will highlight and describe various sermon-category slices to help you discover if you are preaching the whole “cake” of Scripture. A consciousness of the various kinds of sermon that may be preached challenges the preacher to vary his style and content and so prevent monotonous sameness. It will also highlight gaps which may be filled by concentrated study in that particular area.

Although the question of slice size will be touched upon, the variables of preacher, hearer, time, place, and needs are too great to give any concrete rules. Answers to this question should be constantly and prayerfully sought from the great Shepherd of the sheep.

One point we might make before considering slice-size is the need for a balanced selection of texts from Old Testament and New Testament; and in the New Testament from both the Gospels and the Epistles. If we might divide Scripture into three main divisions – the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the Epistles – a general rule of thumb might be that our texts should be drawn in roughly equal proportion from these three sources.

One last word of qualification before we present a classification of the different types of sermon. Please remember that the distinctions are not always clear-cut and will often overlap. However, the distinctions are still useful if we remember that we are talking about general emphasis more than distinct separate classes.

THE SLICES

1. The Doctrinal Sermon

A doctrinal sermon presents the facts and truths of the Gospel message. It involves systematic and methodical instruction in the great doctrines of Christianity. Truth is the staple diet of the Christian and is the lifeblood of faith and holiness. This practical end should be ever in view. Doctrinal instruction is always with a view to believing and doing. As the Reformers said, “Doctrines must be preached practically, and duties doctrinally.”

Charles Spurgeon wrote: “Sermons should have real teaching in them, and their doctrine should be solid, substantial, and abundant...Nothing can compensate for the absence of teaching; all the rhetoric in the world is but as chaff to the wheat in contrast to the gospel of our salvation.”¹

One tendency to avoid is to try and preach a whole doctrine in one sermon. This results in general, vague, and uninteresting sermons. John Broadus said: “To choose some one aspect of a great subject is usually far better, as there is thus much better opportunity for the speaker to work out something fresh, and much better prospect of making the hearers take a lively interest in the subject as a whole...Take it as a general rule, the more narrow the subject, the more thoughts you will have.”²

¹ C H Spurgeon, *Lectures to my Students* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1965), 70.

² J Broadus, *The Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co, 1929), 79.

Example 1: Instead of preaching on the atonement in general you may divide the subject into various sermons entitled: (1) The need for atonement, (2) the nature of the atonement, (3) the extent of the atonement, (4) the beneficiaries of the atonement, (5) the effects of the atonement.

Example 2: Another approach might be to use a concordance to list the different verse relating to repentance, and be led by these texts into a careful and varied treatment of the various aspects revealed in them.

Be motivated and encouraged by this thought from John Broadus: “The preacher who can endeavour to make doctrinal truth interesting as well as intelligible to his congregation, and gradually bring them to a good acquaintance with the doctrines of the Bible, is rendering them an inestimable service.”³

2. Theistic Sermons

This may seem a strange idea, as surely all sermons are theistic? There are two points to be underlined here. Firstly, ensure that your sermons are focussed on God – His nature, His demands, His provisions – rather than being focussed on the needs and desires of men and women. Secondly, there must be a balance in our theism. We must ensure that we not only preach the whole God, as well as the whole counsel of God. We must not neglect the Father, the Son, or the Spirit. Instead let our preaching on each of the persons of the Godhead reflect the Scriptural balance.

Example: In some circles the Holy Spirit may be over-emphasised, but in others He may be under-represented.

3. Apologetic Sermons

Apologetic preaching involves the defence of Scriptural doctrine and exposure of false views, with the ultimate aim of protecting the flock. This usually involves defence of the doctrines of Scripture and may also involve exposing and attacking opposite views.

In preaching such sermons we must be aware of certain dangers. Firstly, we must avoid the implication that the truthfulness of Christianity is open to question. Secondly, care must be taken not to suggest difficulties previously unknown and then failing to adequately address and remove them. Thirdly, remember that the argument for Christianity is cumulative and cannot be presented in its entirety in one sermon.

Example: The use of evidences to support six-day creation and the exposure and refutation of evolution.

4. Controversial sermons

While apologetic sermons are concerned with the defence of Christianity from attacks coming from outside the church, we use the term “controversial” or “polemical” sermons to describe sermons which are concerned with errors and heresies from within the church.

Preachers must be willing to content for the faith (Jude 3) and hold fast to the form of sound words (2 Tim.1:13). There are two extremes to be avoided here. Firstly of the false charity which never contends with any other Christians even when duty calls. And secondly, there is the love of conflict and the associated failure to distinguish between fundamental and secondary issue. Broadus portrays the required balance thus: “It would

³ J Broadus, *The Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co, 1929), 77.

seem to be a just principle that a preacher should never go out of his way to find a controversial matter, nor go out of his way to avoid it. He who continually shrinks from conflict should stir himself up to faithfulness; he who is by nature belligerent, should cultivate forbearance and courtesy.”⁴ J W Alexander warned against “preaching with a contentious spirit, or so as to produce such a spirit.”

Example: Sermons on the subjects and modes of baptism.

5. Practical sermons

Practical or ethical sermons discuss and propose the duties of the Christian toward God and man. It should be remembered that the aim and end of all sermons is practical. However, here we are considering sermons which have an especially practical emphasis.

Again we emphasise the need for balance here, a need highlighted by Dabney who said: “The exclusive preaching of doctrine to professed Christians tends to cultivate an Antinomian spirit. The exclusive inculcation of duties fosters self-righteousness. The edification of the Church, then, demands the diligent intermixture of both kinds.”⁵

Practical sermons should be both negative and positive, condemning the wrong and exhorting to the right. They should be specific and not general, abstract and vague. Liberty of conscience should be recognised, and motivation should be love-centred not law-centred.

Example: Sermons on many of the Proverbs.

6. Political sermons

Political sermons present the Christian view on the great questions affecting the State and public morals. Without following a particular party-line, the preacher will bring biblical principles to bear on questions of public policy.

Example: Sermons on the evils of abortion, or on the biblical conditions for a just war.

7. Historical sermons

Historical sermons present lessons drawn from the many personalities or events which fill the pages of the Bible. We cannot but notice how God has chosen to present most of the doctrines of the Bible in narrative form rather than in simple statements of truth. Broadus explains the reason: “Nothing so interests us all as a person. No inanimate object, or general proposition, will make much impression upon mankind at large, unless it is personified or impersonated, or invested with some personal interest....A celebrated lecturer on history once stated in conversation that he found it difficult to interest a popular audience, if he presented merely historical events, periods or lessons. These must be associated with some person.”⁶

Two cautions to bear in mind when preaching historical sermons are, firstly, the importance of having a sufficient background knowledge of the history, geography and culture of the Bible if we are to present the scenes, events, and people in a vivid and graphic way. Secondly, remember that all biblical histories, events, and personalities point towards that One person, and one event of Christ’s person and work.

⁴ J Broadus, *The Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co, 1929), 84.

⁵ R L Dabney, *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 58.

⁶ J Broadus, *The Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co, 1929), 94.

Example: The covenant with Abraham pointing towards the ultimate seed and sacrifice of Christ.

8. Experimental sermons

Experimental sermons describe the varied experiences of men and women receiving the Gospel and living for Christ in the midst of the trials and triumphs of life. Experimental preaching need not confine itself to the Bible for examples. There are past historical examples, the preacher's own experience, and the experiences of other Christians he knows.

Example: A sermon which describes conviction of sin, how it is wrought, the causes of it, the effects of it.

9. Topical sermons

Topical sermons need not be tied to one verse but may include consideration of a number of verses on a biblical topic. Or else, some momentous event may provide the basis for a topical sermon.

Example: A tsunami, or a notable accident providing the basis of sermon on the need for repentance and preparation for eternity.

10. Evangelistic sermons

While all sermons should contain an appeal to the unconverted, evangelistic sermons are aimed largely or wholly at the unconverted. This will involve the application of the law's threatenings against their sin, the presentation of God's provision of a Saviour, the need for repentance and faith, and the urgency of the moment.

Example: A sermon on the Philippian jailer's question, "What must I do to be saved?"

11. Discriminatory sermons

Discriminatory preaching attempts to distinguish the characteristic marks of the saint and the sinner. It is an anticipation of the final separation of the sheep from the goats based on the evidences of grace or lack it in the lives of the hearers. J W Alexander said: "It is much to be regretted that this accurate discrimination in preaching has gone so much out of use in our times. It is but seldom that we hear a discourse from the pulpit which is calculated to afford much aid to Christians in ascertaining their own true character; or which will serve to detect the hypocrite and formalist, and drive them from all their false refuges."⁷

Example: A sermon on any one of the beatitudes which set forth the marks of a citizen of the kingdom of heaven.

Application

Use this as a checklist to regularly review the diet you are serving up to your hearers. And ask for God's guidance to ensure that you are preaching the whole counsel of God in the proportions required for your situation and people.

⁷ J W Alexander, *Thoughts on Preaching*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 173