

PREACHING CHRIST
LECTURE 5
INTRODUCTION: BEGINNING THE SERMON

INTRODUCTION

“God is not the author of confusion” but of order and structure. Therefore, any sermon which claims to set forth God should be made in His image, that is, with order and structure. Sermon structure and order will also help the preacher to preach and the hearers to hear, as they are both made in the image of God.

Just as a tree is made up of roots, a trunk with branches, and fruit, so most sermons are made up of an introduction, an exposition, and a conclusion. In this lecture we will dig into the roots of the sermon and consider its introduction.

We will look, at the necessity of an introduction, the negatives of an introduction, and the nature of an introduction.

I. THE NECESSITY OF AN INTRODUCTION

There are two reasons why our sermons should have an introduction.

1. Ordinary human experience

In our ordinary everyday social contact with other people we are accustomed to a gradual introduction before the main topic of conversation is introduced. Whether on the phone or in person, we usually spend some time identifying each other and preparing the ground for discussion of the relevant issue. Indeed, we would consider it rude and offensive for someone to abruptly announce the topic of conversation and launch into it. This is simple common sense. Just as music has a prelude, and dramas have a prologue, so sermons have an introduction.

2. Sinful human experience

The preacher has to remember that he is speaking on subjects which the depraved heart of men and woman are averse to and opposed to. Even Christians often arrive in Church with worldly thoughts and feelings, their souls chilled and deadened by ordinary life in this world. Though the preacher may have mastered his subject and been warmed by it, few of his hearers are like this. Dabney said: “When he is all fire and they as yet are ice, a sudden contact between his mind and theirs will produce rather a shock and revulsion than sympathetic harmony.”¹

It therefore becomes necessary to introduce the subject of our sermon like a gradually rising and warming sun rather than to blind our hearers with spotlights. We cannot assume that our hearers will be automatically interested in our subject or sympathetic to it, and so we must spend some time in removing indifference, initiating interest – spiritual, practical, or intellectual interest – and increasing sympathy.

Archibald Alexander warned his students to take great care in preparing their introductions. He warned his students, “It is a great mistake to suppose that the introduction and application of a sermon require little study. Perhaps they require the exercise of invention and ingenuity more than any other part of a sermon.”² So, the necessity of an introduction

¹ R L Dabney, *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 141.

² J W Alexander, *Thoughts on Preaching*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 98.

should encourage careful preparation. Don't let the ship strike the wall when just getting out of the harbour.

II. THE NEGATIVES OF AN INTRODUCTION

We shall now briefly consider some things to avoid in introducing a sermon.

1. Don't be too long

Over-lengthy introductions imbalance the sermon, waste time, and weary the congregation. An introduction should contain only one leading thought. "There is no need of a porch to enter a porch: we desire to step at once from the porch into the house."³

2. Don't be too showy

Some preachers think that they will get their hearers attention by displaying their historical, cultural or literary learning in their introduction. Shun the sensational and anything that smacks of display.

3. Don't be too ambitious

Trying to link a distant event or saying with the subject of the sermon by a long series of elaborate logical leaps will not be persuasive. The introduction must be clearly relevant to the body of the sermon.

4. Don't be too personal

To start with a personal story now and again may be acceptable but not as a general rule.

5. Don't be too loud

The introduction is meant to be a gradual awakening not a bugle in the ear which exhausts the preacher for the main body of the sermon. Save your steam for the "hot" parts.

6. Don't be too predictable

One writer has argued that a good introduction to a sermon would only be good for that sermon and for no other. If it is adaptable to other sermons then it probably is too general and vague. Try to avoid stereotypical and predictable introductions. Sometimes it may be useful to give a brief introduction before reading the text.

7. Don't steal the sermon's thunder

The introduction should pave the way for the sermon, not repeat it. If you introduce later material from the main body of the sermon in the introduction, you end up repeating the introduction. Dabney condemned this practice thus: "A stone which is absolutely necessary to close his arch has been already laid in the threshold."⁴

³ R L Dabney, *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 144.

⁴ R L Dabney, *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 144.

8. Don't be apologetic

Preachers must not introduce their sermons with an apology for themselves or their sermons. This will not excite sympathy in the hearers but contempt. Preachers are authorised and authoritative ambassadors of Christ and must convey that.

9. Don't flatter

Preacher's who begin by flattering their audiences will be regarded as insincere sycophants.

10. Don't be offensive

Great care must be taken not to offend taste especially at the beginning, when first impressions are so important. Have a regard to the age and sensitivities of your congregation.

III. THE NATURE OF AN INTRODUCTION

Let us now consider the various types of sermon introduction.

1. The "Pay Attention" Introduction

Sometimes the preacher might begin with a solemn call for attention to an important subject. This was done in scripture by Moses (Dt.4:1), Stephen (Acts 7:2), and the Lord (Mat.15:10). But such a request, if often repeated will lose its force and it is usually best to say something that will at once interest the hearer's mind. "What is the best way," asked a young preacher of an older one, "to get the attention of the congregation?" "Give 'em something to attend to," was the gruff reply.

2. The Contextual Introduction

This is one of the more common types of introduction, where the preacher will explain the connections and relations between the text and the surrounding material. This has the benefit of keeping the text central in the sermon and so in the minds of the hearers.

3. The Background Introduction

Here the preacher will explain the history, or geography, or culture of the people and places relevant to the text or the context.

4. The Principle Introduction

In this case the preacher will begin with a principle which is familiar to the hearers and proceed to show in the sermon how this particular example proves the principle. Any statement of principle should be positive, brief, bold and exact.

5. The Example Introduction

This is really a reversal of the "Principle Introduction". Here the preacher begins with a real-life example which illustrates a principle he is about to preach upon. The example must have gravity and dignity so as not to jar with the sacred material to follow in the sermon. Dabney recounts how a New Year's sermon on the text, "This year thou shalt die" was introduced by the statement that both Jonathan Edwards and Samuel Davies

preached from this passage at the beginning of the years in which they were unexpectedly cut off by death.

A made-up example may also be used now and again as long as its fictional character is noted.

6. A Contrast Introduction

This is again related to the previous two types of introduction, except in this case a commonly held worldly principle or well-known example of worldly conduct is contrasted with Scriptural principles or examples which are then preached upon.

7. A Topical Introduction

The preacher can often gain attention and arouse interest by preaching on a subject of current national or ecclesiastical interest.

8. An Advantages Introduction

A sermon may be introduced by the highlighting of the advantages – intellectual, emotional, spiritual, or practical – which attend the study of a particular subject. This is especially useful when the subject may be especially sensitive or offensive to the natural heart of men and women.

9. A Seasonal Introduction

Reference to a particular time of year in the national, local, or ecclesiastical calendar may profitably form material for sermon introductions.

10. An Apologetic Introduction

This is not a contradiction of the earlier negative: “Don’t be apologetic.” This is a reference to the need for the preacher to confront error and heresy in the church and outside it. He may begin with a reference to a person, a cult, or an organisation which holds a particular view and then go on to prove its falsehood and assert the biblical truth.

CONCLUSION

In this lecture we have briefly considered the sermon’s “roots” – its introduction. In our next lecture we will progress to consider the sermon’s “trunk” and “branches” – its organisation.