

PREACHING CHRIST
LECTURE 6
ORGANISATION (1): THE PRINCIPLES

INTRODUCTION

In the previous lecture we studied sermon introductions, which we likened to the roots of a tree. We would now like to look at the trunk, the main body of the sermon. The nature of this part of the sermon may be surmised from the various names which homiletics teachers give to it – the division, the development, the argument, the treatment, the proof, or the discussion.

I am assuming here that the work of textual exegesis has already been done (see Lecture 3), and what we are concerned with now is the organising of the resultant material.

In this lecture we shall examine the principles of sermon organisation, and in the next lecture we shall look at the practice of sermon organisation. In other words, we shall firstly look at the theory and then look at a number of practical examples.

1. Structured

The preacher is described as, “a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim.2:15). This means that a major part of the preacher’s task is to divide the word of God into appropriate blocks of material. His sermons should have a plan or a structure. This means that the main block of sermon material will be divided into two or more smaller and distinct blocks of material which are then presented in logical sequence.

Sometimes this plan will be obvious before the preacher even begins to question the text. Sometimes it will arise as he works on it, and sometimes it will only arise after the work of exegesis is completed. In sermon preparation, the preacher should be constantly seeking a structure. And, even when one emerges, the question should be, “Is this the best one?” The preacher must be prepared to dispense with his initial structure if another emerges which better presents the subject.

The major benefit of structure, apart from helping the preacher to present his material, is that it greatly aids retention of the message by the listeners.

2. Simple

Sermon structures ought to be as simple as possible, with as few divisions as possible. Many sermons have suffered from over-elaborate analysis and an over-multiplication of divisions and sub-divisions, making them more like lectures than sermons. Multiple divisions tend to attract attention more to the structure of the message rather than to the message itself. They also tend to over-tax the memory and make the listening exercise more mind-centred than heart-centred, more cerebral than spiritual

What is the ideal number of divisions? Three is generally thought to be the most effective for listeners as it presents the material with a beginning, a middle, and an end. J W Alexander wrote: “...minute division of a text, or unnecessary elaboration of points that are obvious, serve no purpose if preaching is to be useful and edifying. Hearers will be either annoyed at the unnecessary minutiae, or despondent that they cannot remember the divisions and sub-points. It is an interesting observation that some of the greatest sermons are deceptively simple in design and development. Simplicity in design, organisation and

development is the mark of a great communicator. Complexity confounds – simplicity satisfies.”¹

3. Striking

The preacher should strive to ensure that his headings are fresh and striking. Vividness and variety should be the aim so that the hearer’s attention will be immediately aroused. John Broadus said: “So many sermons follow the beaten track, in which we can see all that is coming, as to make it a weary task even for devout hearers to listen attentively. One feels inclined to utter a plaintive cry, ‘Worthy brother, excellent brother, if you could only manage to drive us sometimes over a different road, even if much less smooth, even if you do not know it very well – I am so tired of this!’”²

4. Stated

There has been much debate over how much should be stated at the beginning of a sermon.

Some of the older writers argue for a concise statement of the sermon subject before beginning the sermon proper. This is a short phrase or sentence which contains the proposition of the sermon and will usually reflect the structure. It may be long or short, logical or rhetorical. It may be framed as an indicative, an imperative, an exhortation, or an interrogative. Whether the preacher states this openly at the beginning of his sermon, it is important that the preacher himself is able to encapsulate the point of his sermon in such a proposition for his own benefit in both preparation and delivery. He should be asking, “What is it that I am trying to achieve here today?” “What is my purpose?”

Dabney’s view was: “The preacher must have one main subject of discourse, to which he adheres with supreme reference throughout. But this is not enough. He must, second, propose to himself one definite impression on the hearer’s soul, to the making of which everything in the sermon is bent...Unity of discourse requires, then, not only singleness of a dominant subject, but also singleness of practical impression. To secure the former see to it that the whole discussion may admit of reduction to a single proposition. To secure the latter, let the preacher hold before him, through the whole preparation of the sermon, the one practical effect intended to be produced upon the hearer’s will.”³

Dabney went on to say: “The proper image of rhetorical unity is not found in the star which scatters its rays on every side from one point of light, to be absorbed and lost in the darkness of space, but in the lens which collects many parallel or even dissentient rays into one burning focus.”⁴

Another question arises over whether the sermon divisions should be announced at the beginning. Most homiletics teachers would say that the general answer is, “No.” The argument is that pre-announcement removes the element of surprise and precludes spontaneity. It also might encourage some to switch-off if they wrongly conclude from the headings that the sermon is not for them.

The only occasions when pre-announcement might be desirable is when the train of thought is especially difficult to follow and a preview of the structure will help to follow it; or

¹ J W Alexander, *Thoughts on Preaching*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 104.

² J Broadus, *The Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co, 1929), 278.

³ R L Dabney, *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 109.

⁴ *Ibid*, 111.

when it is especially important for the successive steps in an exposition to be noted; or when it is judged that pre-announcement will awaken interest rather than diminish it.

On the whole, though, we agree with Shedd who thought that animated re-capitulation at the end of the sermon is better than dry pre-announcement at the beginning.

5. Smooth

There should be movement or progress in the structure. People must feel that they are moving towards the flowers and fruit at the top of the tree. The movement from point to point should not be irregular and illogical and neither should there be significant interruptions, pauses, and gaps in the argument. The parts should fit well together “like well-cut stones which need no cement.” Each should grow out of the latter by natural development. Ease of transition will be in proportion to the study expended. If the transition is difficult we should ask if our arrangement is correct. Or we may be trying to work in some idea which has no place in the sermon.

In *Cure of Souls* John Watson remarked: “Three detached sermonettes do not make one sermon; but, on the other hand, a handful of observations tied together by a text are not an organic whole. It all depends on whether the heads advance, ascend, cumulate, or are independent, disconnected, parallel. Heads are either watertight compartments, in which case you cannot pass from one to the other, and are exasperated by the iron door, or they are floors of a tower, in which case one will not halt till he reaches the top, because with every fresh ascent he gets a wider view.”⁵

In general, negatives should precede positives, the abstract should precede the concrete, generals should precede specifics, instruction and conviction should precede appeal.

6. Symmetrical

This does not mean every part is the same size, although gross imbalance should be avoided as it suggests that we have not divided out matter properly. What this does mean is that each part should reflect the symmetry of the text. The divisions should all sustain the same kind of relation to the subject. Sometimes a preacher may have divisions which are branches of the trees and others are but branches of branches.

7. Spoken

The divisions must be suited to spoken announcement. Logical divisions may help in preparation, but the preacher is a speaker and should bear in mind the difference between logical and rhetorical divisions. This is why alliterative headings are often to be aimed at. Or, if not headings with the same letter, then aim to have headings of the same length or rhythm.

8. Separate

The divisions should not overlap or include other divisions. They should be set forth as distinct divisions. When one thought may legitimately be given in two divisions, decide which is the best and stick to it. Do not make a division without a difference which will result in either repetition or premature anticipation.

⁵ John Watson, *Cure of Souls* (Yale Lectures for 1896), p41f.

9. Spiritual

When we say that sermon structures should be spiritual we are saying that the sermon material should be organised throughout with a spiritual intent – with the aim of doing spiritual good. This means that application should not be left to the end of the sermon, leaving the main part of the sermon as an arid waste of mere facts and information.

J W Alexander said: “In order to do good by preaching, the attention of the audience must be gained and kept up; and some impression made on their feelings.”⁶

This must mean that the Word is applied to the hearers in a relevant way throughout. Application will gain interest for the information, which then in turn deepens the force of the appeal. As Broadus said: “The successive waves of emotion may thus rise higher and higher to the end. And besides, while thought produces emotion, it is also true that emotion reacts upon and quickens thought, so that impressive application of one division may secure for the next a closer attention.”⁷

10. Scriptural

Although this is really the most important point of all, we put it last here for emphasis. In general, the sermon structure will arise obviously from the text of Scripture.

J W Alexander puts this well: “Ideally, sermon outlines will arise out of a text, after careful study of the context and meaning of the passage to be preached upon. Care must be taken not to impose an outline on a text that does not arise naturally from the text.”⁸

CONCLUSION

We can learn to structure sermons by examining the sermons of the best preachers, by having our own structures critiqued by other preachers, and also by the study of logic.

Having considered some of the “principles” of sermon organisation in this lecture, in the next we will look at the “practice.”

⁶ J W Alexander, *Thoughts on Preaching*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 96.

⁷ J Broadus, *The Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co, 1929), 292.

⁸ J W Alexander, *Thoughts on Preaching*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 103.