



A TREATISE ON PREACHING

Simplicity in Preaching

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FIRST BISHOP OF LIVERPOOL · 1816–1900

HOLD FAST, HELD FAST

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“Of making many books there is no end.”

ECCLESIASTES 12:12

There are few subjects about which that saying of King Solomon is more true than that of preaching. The volumes which have been written in order to show ministers how to preach are enough to make a small library. In sending forth one more little treatise, I only propose to touch one branch of the subject.

I do not pretend to consider what should be the substance and matter of a sermon. I purposely leave alone such points as “gravity, unction, liveliness, warmth,” and the like, or the comparative merits of written or extemporaneous sermons. I wish to confine myself to one point, which receives far less attention than it deserves. That point is simplicity in language and style.

I ought to be able to tell my readers something about “simplicity,” if experience will give any help. I began preaching forty-five years ago, when I first took orders in a poor rural parish, and a great portion of my ministerial life has been spent in preaching to labourers and farmers. I know the enormous difficulty of preaching to such hearers, of making them understand one’s meaning, and securing their attention.

So far as concerns language and composition, I deliberately say that I would rather preach before the University at Oxford or Cambridge, or the Temple, or Lincoln’s Inn, or the Houses of Parliament, than I would address an agricultural congregation on a fine hot afternoon in the month of August. I have heard of a labourer who enjoyed Sunday more than any other day in the week. “Because,” he said, “I sit comfortably in church, put up my legs, have nothing to think about, and just go to sleep.” Some of my younger friends in the ministry may some day be called to preach to such congregations as I have had, and I shall be glad if they can profit by my experience.

Before entering on the subject, I wish to clear the way by making four prefatory remarks.

THE FOUR PREFATORY REMARKS

PREFATORY REMARK · ONE

Simplicity is of the utmost importance

I ask all my readers to remember that to attain simplicity in preaching is of the utmost importance to every minister who wishes to be useful to souls. Unless you are simple in your sermons you will never be understood, and unless you are understood you cannot do good to those who hear you. It was a true saying of Quintilian, “If you do not wish to be understood, you deserve to be neglected.” Of course the first object of a minister should be to preach the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but “the truth as it is in Jesus.” But the next thing he ought to aim at is that his sermon may be understood; and it will not be understood by most of his hearers if it is not simple.

PREFATORY REMARK · TWO

Simplicity is by no means easy

To attain simplicity in preaching is by no means an easy matter. No greater mistake can be made than to suppose this. “To make hard things seem hard,” to use the substance of a saying of Archbishop Usher’s, “is within the reach of all, but to make hard things seem easy and intelligible is a height attained by very few speakers.” One of the wisest and best of the Puritans said two hundred years ago “that the greater part of preachers shoot over the heads of the people.” I fear a vast proportion of what we preach is not understood by our hearers any more than if it were Greek.

When people hear a simple sermon, or read a simple tract, they are apt to say, “How true! how plain! how easy to understand!”—and to suppose that any one can write in that style. Allow me to tell my readers that it is an extremely difficult thing to write simple, clear, perspicuous, and forcible English. Look at the sermons of Charles Bradley, of Clapham. A sermon of his reads most beautifully. It is so simple and natural that any one feels at once that the meaning is as clear as the sun at noonday. Every word is the right word, and every word is in its right place. Yet the labour those sermons cost Mr. Bradley was very great indeed.

Those who have read Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* attentively can hardly fail to have noticed the exquisite naturalness, ease, and simplicity of its language. And yet it is known that the pains and trouble and time bestowed upon that work were immense. Let it be compared with Johnson's *Rasselas*, which was written off in a few days, it is said, under higher pressure—and the difference is at once apparent.

In fact, to use very long words, to seem very learned, to make people go away after a sermon saying, "How fine! how clever! how grand!"—all this is very easy work. But to write what will strike and stick, to speak or to write that which at once pleases and is understood, and becomes assimilated with a hearer's mind and a thing never forgotten—that, we may depend upon it, is a very difficult thing and a very rare attainment.

PREFATORY REMARK · THREE

I do not mean childish preaching

When I talk of simplicity in preaching I would not have my readers suppose I mean childish preaching. If we suppose the poor like that sort of sermon, we are greatly mistaken. If our hearers once imagine we consider them a parcel of ignorant folks for whom any kind of "infant's food" is good enough, our chance of doing good is lost altogether. People do not like even the appearance of condescending preaching. They feel we are not treating them as equals, but inferiors. Human nature always dislikes that. They will at once put up their backs, stop their ears, and take offence—and then we might as well preach to the winds.

PREFATORY REMARK · FOUR

Nor is it coarse or vulgar preaching

It is not coarse or vulgar preaching that is needed. It is quite possible to be simple, and yet to speak like a gentleman, and with the demeanour of a courteous and refined person. It is an utter mistake to imagine that uneducated men and women prefer to be spoken to in an illiterate way, and by an uneducated person. To suppose that a lay-evangelist or Scripture-reader, who knows nothing of Latin or Greek, and is only familiar with his Bible, is more acceptable than an Oxford first-class man—if that first-class man knows how to preach—is a complete error. People only tolerate vulgarity and coarseness, as a rule, when they can get nothing else.

Having made these prefatory remarks in order to clear the way, I will now proceed to give five brief hints as to the best method of attaining simplicity in preaching.

FIVE HINTS TOWARD SIMPLICITY

The best method of attaining simplicity in preaching

- 1 Have a clear view of your subject
- 2 Use simple words
- 3 Aim at a simple style of composition
- 4 Cultivate a direct style
- 5 Make abundant use of illustration

FIRST HINT

Have a clear view of your subject

If you want to attain simplicity in preaching, take care that you have a clear view of the subject upon which you are going to preach. Of all the five hints I am about to give, this is the most important. Mind, then, when your text is chosen, that you understand it and see right through it; that you know precisely what you want to prove, what you want to teach, and what you want people's minds to carry away. If you yourself begin in a fog, you may depend upon it you will leave your people in darkness.

Cicero, one of the greatest ancient orators, said long ago, "No one can possibly speak clearly and eloquently about a subject which he does not understand"—and I am satisfied that he spoke the truth. Archbishop Whately was a very shrewd observer of human nature, and he said rightly of a vast number of preachers that "they aimed at nothing, and they hit nothing. Like men landing on an unknown island, they set out in ignorance, and travelled on in ignorance all the day long."

I repeat most emphatically: take care you thoroughly understand your subject. Never choose a text of which you do not quite know what it means. Beware of taking obscure passages such as those found in unfulfilled and emblematic prophecies. If a man will continually preach to an ordinary congregation about the seals and vials and trumpets in Revelation, or about Ezekiel's temple, or about predestination, free will, and the eternal purposes of God, it will not be surprising if he fails to attain simplicity. These are very deep subjects, about which wise Christians often disagree, and it is almost impossible to make them very simple. There are hundreds of plain subjects to be found in God's Word.

Beware, too, of taking up what I call "fanciful subjects" and "spiritualizing texts"—dragging out of them meanings which the Holy Spirit never intended to put into them. A preacher should never take a text and extract from it, as a dentist would a tooth from the jaw, something which, however true in itself, is not the plain literal meaning of the inspired words. The sermon may seem very glittering and ingenious, and his people may go away saying, "What a clever parson we have got!" But if they can neither find the sermon in the text, nor the text in the sermon, their minds are perplexed.

When I speak of spiritualizing texts, let me explain what I mean. I remember hearing of a minister in a northern town who was famous for preaching in this style. Once he gave out for his text, “He who is so impoverished that he has no oblation chooses unto him a tree that will not rot” (Isaiah 40:20). “Here,” said he, “is man by nature impoverished and undone. He has nothing to offer in order to make satisfaction for his soul. And what ought he to do? He ought to choose a tree which cannot rot—even the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

On another occasion, being anxious to preach on the doctrine of indwelling sin, he chose his text out of the history of Joseph and his brethren: “The old man of whom you spoke, is he yet alive?” (Genesis 43:27). Out of this question he ingeniously twisted a discourse about the infection of nature remaining in the believer—a grand truth, no doubt, but certainly not the truth of the passage. If you want to preach about the corruption of human nature, or about Christ crucified, you need not seek for such far-fetched texts. If you want to be simple, mind you choose plain simple texts!

Furthermore, if you wish to see through your subjects thoroughly, do not be ashamed of dividing your sermons and stating your divisions. There is a morbid dread of “firstly, secondly, and thirdly” in many quarters, and I frankly confess that a lively undivided sermon is much better than one divided in a dull, stupid, illogical way. He who can preach sermons which strike and stick without divisions, by all means let him hold on his way; but let him not despise his neighbour who divides.

All I say is—if we would be simple, there must be order in a sermon, as there is in an army. What wise general would mix up artillery, infantry, and cavalry in one confused mass in the day of battle? What giver of a banquet would dream of putting on the table the whole of the viands at once—the soup, the fish, the meat, the sweets, the dessert, in one huge dish? Just so it is with sermons. By all means let there be order—whether your divisions are concealed or expressed—order so carefully arranged that your points shall follow one another in beautiful regularity, like regiments marching past before the Queen on a review day in Windsor Park.

For my own part, I honestly confess that I do not think I have preached two sermons in my life without divisions. I find it of the utmost importance to make people understand, remember, and carry away what I say—and I am certain that divisions help me to do so. They are, in fact, like hooks and pegs and shelves in the mind. If you study the sermons of men who have been successful preachers, you will always find order, and often divisions, in their sermons.

I am not a bit ashamed to say that I often read the sermons of Mr. Spurgeon. He can preach most ably, and he proves it by keeping his enormous congregation together. When you read his sermons, note how clearly he divides a sermon, and fills each division with beautiful and simple ideas. How easily you grasp his meaning! He brings before you certain great truths, that hang to you like hooks of steel, and which, once planted in your memory, you never forget!

My first point, then, is that you must thoroughly understand your subject; and if you want to know whether you understand it, try to divide and arrange it. For forty-five years I have kept note-books in which I write down texts and heads of sermons. Whenever I get hold of a text, and see my way through it, I put it down. If I do not see my way through a text, I cannot preach on it, because I know I cannot be simple; and if I cannot be simple, I had better not preach at all.

SECOND HINT

Use simple words

Try to use in all your sermons, as far as you can, simple words. When I talk of simple words, I do not mean words of only one syllable, or words which are purely Saxon. I rather prefer the saying of that wise old heathen Cicero, that orators should try to use words which are “in daily common use” among the people—whether the words are Saxon or not, or of two or three syllables. It does not matter, so long as they are commonly used and understood.

Whatever you do, beware of what the poor shrewdly call “dictionary” words—that is, of words which are abstract, or scientific, or pedantic, or complicated, or vague, or very long. They may seem very fine, and sound very grand, but they are rarely of any use. The most powerful and forcible words, as a rule, are very short.

A vast number of words of other than Saxon origin are used by writers of notorious simplicity. Take the famous work of John Bunyan, and look at the very title of it—*The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Neither of the leading words in that title is Saxon. Would he have improved matters if he had called it “The Wayfarer’s Walk”? I admit freely that words of French and Latin origin are generally inferior to Saxon; and, as a rule, I would say—use strong pure Saxon words, if you can. But you must not think words cannot be good and simple if they are not of Saxon origin. In any case, beware of long words.

Dr. Gee, in his excellent book *Our Sermons*, very ably points out the uselessness of long words not in common use. “Talk of happiness rather than of felicity; talk of almighty rather than omnipotent; forbidden rather than proscribed; hateful rather than noxious; afterwards rather than subsequently.” When you preach to ordinary congregations, the sooner you throw overboard this sort of English, and use plain common words, the better. One thing is quite certain: without simple words you will never attain simplicity in preaching.

THIRD HINT

Aim at a simple style of composition

If you take up the sermons of that great and wonderful man Dr. Chalmers, you can hardly fail to see what an enormous number of lines you meet with without coming to a full stop. This I regard as a great mistake. Beware of writing many lines without coming to a pause, and so allowing the minds of your hearers to take breath. Beware of colons and semicolons. Stick to commas and full stops, and take care to write as if you were asthmatic or short of breath. Never write or speak very long sentences or long paragraphs. Use stops frequently, and start again.

Enormous sentences full of colons, semicolons, and parentheses, with paragraphs of two or three pages' length, are utterly fatal to simplicity. We should bear in mind that preachers have to do with hearers, and not readers. A reader of English can always help himself by looking back a few lines and refreshing his mind. A hearer of English hears once for all, and if he loses the thread of your sermon in a long involved sentence, he very likely never finds it again.

Simplicity of style depends very much upon the proper use of proverbs and pointed sentences. This is of vast importance. Here is the value of much that you find in Matthew Henry's commentary and Bishop Hall's *Contemplations*. Take a few examples of what I mean:

"What we weave in time, we wear in eternity."

"Hell is paved with good intentions."

"Sin forsaken is one of the best evidences of sin forgiven."

"It matters little how we die, but much how we live."

"Meddle with no man's person, but spare no man's sin."

"He who begins with prayer will end with praise."

"In religion, as in business, there are no gains without pains."

"In the Bible there are shallows where a lamb can wade, and depths where an elephant must swim."

"One thief on the cross was saved, that none should despair; and only one, that none should presume."

Proverbial, pointed, and antithetical sayings of this kind give wonderful perspicuousness and force to a sermon. Labour to store your minds with them. Use them judiciously, especially at the end of paragraphs, and you will find them an immense help. But of long, involved, complicated sentences—always beware!

FOURTH HINT

Cultivate a direct style

If you wish to preach simply, use a direct style. What do I mean by this? I mean the practice and custom of saying “I” and “you.” When a man takes up this style of preaching, he is often told that he is conceited and egotistical. The result is that many preachers are never direct, and always think it very humble and becoming to say “we.” But I remember good Bishop Villiers saying that “we” was a word kings and corporations should use, and they alone—but that parish clergymen should always talk of “I” and “you.” I endorse that saying with all my heart.

I declare I never can understand what the famous pulpit “we” means. Does the preacher who all through his sermon keeps saying “we” mean himself and the bishop? or himself and the Church? or himself and the congregation? or, after all, does he only mean myself, plain “John Smith” or “Thomas Jones”? When he visits his parishioners, or sits by a sick-bed, or orders bread at the baker’s, or meat at the butcher’s, he does not say “we,” but “I.” Why, then, can he not say “I” in the pulpit? Why not stand up on Sunday and say, “Reading in the Word of God, I have found a text containing such things as these, and I come to set them before you”?

If you say, “I, the pastor of the parish, come here to talk of something that concerns your soul, something you should believe, something you should do,” you are at any rate understood. I charge and entreat my younger brethren not to forget this point. Never say “we” when you mean “I.” The more you get into the habit of talking plainly to the people, in the first person singular, as old Bishop Latimer did, the simpler will your sermon be, and the more easily understood. The glory of Whitefield’s sermons is their directness.

FIFTH HINT

Make abundant use of illustration

If you would attain simplicity in preaching, you must use plenty of anecdotes and illustrations. You must regard illustrations as windows through which light is let in upon your subject. I need hardly remind you of the example of Him who “spoke as never any man spoke”—our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Study the four Gospels attentively, and mark what a wealth of illustrations His sermons contain. How often you find figure upon figure, parable upon parable, in His discourses!

There was nothing under His eyes from which He did not draw lessons. The birds of the air, the fish in the sea, the sheep, the cornfield, the vineyard, the sower, the reaper, the shepherd, the woman kneading meal, the flowers, the grass, the wedding feast, the sepulchre—all were made vehicles for conveying thoughts to the minds of hearers. What are such parables as the prodigal son, the good Samaritan, the ten virgins, the rich man and Lazarus, but stirring stories that our Lord tells in order to convey some great truth to the souls of His hearers? Try to walk in His footsteps and follow His example.

If you pause in your sermon, and say, “Now I will tell you a story,” I pledge that all who are not too fast asleep will pick up their ears and listen. People like similes, illustrations, and well-told stories, and will listen to them when they will attend to nothing else. And from what countless sources we can get illustrations! Take all the book of nature around us. Look at the sky above and the world beneath. Look at history. Look at all the branches of science—at geology, at botany, at chemistry, at astronomy. What is there in heaven above or earth below from which you may not bring illustrations to throw light on the gospel? He is the best speaker, says an Arabian proverb, who can turn the ear into an eye!

For my part, I not only try to tell stories, but in country parishes I have sometimes put before people familiar illustrations which they can see. Do I want to show them that there must have been a first great Being who made this world? I have sometimes taken out my watch, and said: "Look at this watch. How well it is made! Do any of you suppose that all the screws, all the wheels, all the pins of that watch came together by accident? Would not any one say there must have been a watchmaker? And if so, it follows surely that there must have been a Maker of the world, whose handiwork we see engraved on the face of every one of those glorious planets keeping time to a single second."

Or sometimes I have taken out a bunch of keys and shaken them. The whole congregation, when they hear the keys, look up. Then I say: "Would there be need of any keys if all men were perfect and honest? What does this bunch of keys show? Why, they show that the heart of man is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked." Illustration is one of the best receipts for making a sermon simple, clear, and easily understood. Pick up illustrations wherever you can. Happy is that preacher who has an eye for similitudes, and a memory stored with well-chosen stories. If he is a real man of God, he will never preach to bare walls and empty benches.

But I must add a word of caution. If a man cannot tell stories naturally, he had better not tell them at all. Illustration may be carried too far. Dr. Guthrie's admirable sermons are occasionally so overlaid with illustrations as to remind one of cake made almost entirely of plums and containing hardly any flour. Put plenty of colour and picture into your sermon by all means; but after all there is a limit. Do not put on colour by spoonfuls, but with a brush. This caution remembered, you will find colour an immense aid to simplicity in preaching.

IN SUMMARY

Bear in mind that my five points are these—

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- 1 Have a clear knowledge of what you are going to preach.
 - 2 Use simple words.
 - 3 Acquire a simple style of composition, with short sentences and as few colons and semicolons as possible.
 - 4 Aim at directness.
 - 5 Make abundant use of illustration and anecdote.
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A WORD OF APPLICATION

You will never attain simplicity in preaching without plenty of work—pains and trouble, I say emphatically, pains and trouble. When Turner, the great painter, was asked how it was he mixed his colours so well, and what made them so different from those of other artists—“Mix them? mix them? Why, with brains, sir.” I am persuaded that, in preaching, little can be done except by trouble and by pains.

I have heard that a young and careless clergyman once said to Richard Cecil, “I think I need more faith.” “No,” said the wise old man, “you need more work. You need more pains. You must not think that God will do work for you—though He is ready to do it by you.” I entreat my younger brethren to make time for the composition of sermons, to take trouble, and to exercise their brains by reading. Only mind that you read what is useful.

As your best model, take the English Bible. If you speak the language in which that is written, you will speak well. Read John Bunyan’s immortal work, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Read it again and again, if you wish to attain simplicity in preaching.

Do not be above reading the Puritans. Some of them, no doubt, are heavy. Goodwin and Owen are very heavy, though excellent artillery in position. Read such books as Baxter, and Watson, and Traill, and Flavel, and Charnock, and Hall, and Henry. They are, to my mind, models of the best simple English spoken in old times. Remember, however, that language alters with years. They spoke English, and so do we, but their style was different from ours. Read beside them the best models of modern English that you can get at.

On the other hand, do not be above talking to the poor, and visiting your people from house to house. Sit down with your people by the fireside, and exchange thoughts with them on all subjects. Find out how they think and how they express themselves, if you want them to understand your sermons. By so doing you will insensibly learn much. You will be continually picking up modes of thought, and getting notions as to what you should say in your pulpit.

A humble country clergyman was once asked whether he studied the Fathers. The worthy man replied that he had little opportunity of studying the Fathers, as they were generally out in the fields when he called. But he studied the mothers more, because he often found them at home—and he could talk to them. Wittingly or unwittingly, the good man hit a nail right on the head. We must talk to our people when we are out of church, if we would understand how to preach to them in the church.

IN CONCLUSION

Whatever we preach, or whatever pulpit we occupy—whether we preach simply or not, whether written or extempore—we ought to aim not merely at letting off fireworks, but at preaching that which will do lasting good to souls. “Beautiful” sermons, “brilliant” sermons, “clever” sermons, “popular” sermons, are often sermons which have no effect on the congregation, and do not draw men to Jesus Christ. Let us aim so to preach that what we say may really come home to men’s minds and consciences and hearts, and make them think and consider.

All the simplicity in the world can do no good, unless you preach the simple gospel of Jesus Christ so fully and clearly that everybody can understand it. If “Christ crucified” has not His rightful place in your sermons, and “sin” is not exposed as it should be, and your people are not plainly told what they ought to believe, and be, and do—your preaching is of no use.

All the simplicity in the world, again, is useless without a good, lively delivery. If you bury your head in your bosom, and mumble over your manuscript in a dull, monotonous, droning way, like a bee in a bottle, so that people cannot understand what you are speaking about, your preaching will be in vain. I began preaching alone in the New Forest, and nobody ever told me what was right or wrong in the pulpit. The result was that the first year of my preaching was a series of experiments.

Above all, let us never forget that all the simplicity in the world is useless without prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the grant of God’s blessing, and a life corresponding in some measure to what we preach. Be it ours to have an earnest desire for the souls of men, while we seek for simplicity in preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ; and let us never forget to accompany our sermons by holy living and fervent prayer!



“We hold fast because we are held fast by the sovereign grace of God.”

SOVEREIGN GRACE CHURCHES