

## COMPOSITION.

### CHAPTER VII.

#### THE COMPOSITION OF THE SERMON.

The third part of Homiletics is called Composition, by which is meant the putting together in proper literary form the materials already gathered and arranged in order. It is the completion of the sermon, making it ready for delivery. It is of great importance in the preparation of a sermon, not only because requiring the most time, but it is that which gives the sermon its final form. All that precedes in the way of Invention or Division is but preparatory to this. The preacher's homiletical skill will appear not only in the way he divides his text or forms that skeleton, but rather in the way he clothes that skeleton with flesh and blood, *i.e.*, in the way he elaborates his plan and expresses his thoughts. It is the final building of the house after it has been fitly framed together, and to fail here would bring to naught all previous preparations and labor. To have a good literary style and compose well is a high art and rare attainment, and can be attained only by careful practice and by observing the best rules.

#### ITS PARTS.

Composition may be divided into two parts, the mental and the literary part.

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(a.) **The mental part.** By this we mean the thinking out of a sermon. Whether written or unwritten, every sermon should be carefully thought out, not only in its plan and arrangement, but in its various arguments, proofs, illustrations, and applications. Successful preaching does not depend on raising or stating points, but in their elaboration. Such careful thinking out of the sermon is necessary to make sure our arguments will prove what we wish, and our illustrations fit in all their parts.

Even the mode and manner of expressing certain parts of the sermon should be thought over and determined beforehand, so that when the preacher rises in the pulpit he understands clearly what he is about to say, and how to say it.

Much of this mental composition is done in the formation of the plan or skeleton of the sermon, and too many stop when that is completed. But a carefully prepared plan is not a sermon, but only an outline of the order of thoughts, and unless these thoughts be mentally developed and elaborated, the sermon will be incomplete, inconsistent, and weak.

(b.) **The literary part.**

1. Every young preacher should write out one sermon every week. It is better to write one with deliberation and care, than to write two hurriedly and without proper thought and study. This practice should be kept up for some years, until he has acquired a terse, vigorous, and also graceful style of speech, and until he is able to choose his words and form

his sentences without confusion or embarrassment when facing a congregation.

2. In writing, cultivate a bold hand, and use paper with lines far enough apart to allow easy reading, and interlineations when necessary. Paper is cheaper than eyesight.

3. Sketch out the plan and arrange the skeleton of the sermon before beginning to write, so as to give each part its proper proportion of time and avoid making the sermon too long.

4. Write, if possible, when the fire burns (Ps. xxxix: 3) and the glow is on the heart, and at times least liable to interruption. Write under the impression the congregation is before you, so as to catch something of the enthusiasm of free speech and put it in your written sermon. At the same time keep the purpose or leading idea of the sermon constantly in mind, so as to preserve unity of discourse in the composition.

5. In writing aim at correctness of expression and elegance of style. If these are neglected, the sermon had better remain unwritten.

Correctness is gained by using proper words arranged in proper sentences, and elegance of style by observing the rules of literary elegance and by proper ornamentation. We devote the next section to rules and suggestions on this important part of composition.

#### ITS STYLE, OR LANGUAGE.

The word Style, being derived from the Latin *stylus*, the pointed iron pen with which

the Romans wrote on their tablets, signifies the manner of writing or expressing thought by means of language. The term has passed into general usage and is now applied to a man's dress as well as his address-to his walk as well as to his conversation; but always relates not to what he does, but to the way in which he does it. **If** our language is the raiment with which we clothe our thoughts, our style is the manner in which we arrange these garments so as to produce the most pleasing and beneficial results.

At the same time we should remember style is not so much the adding something to the thought from the outside, as it is the art of bringing out the beauty of the truth itself, and it has been well said" the worst condemnation of a careless and unattractive style is that it does the truth injustice."

The importance of a good style in the composition of sermons can hardly be over-estimated. What is worth saying at all is worth saying well, whether expressed by the pen or the tongue. As ministers of Christ are to deliver the most important truths men can know, it certainly is of great importance they should choose the best words, and arranged in, the best form, to do it. **It** would seem as if some preacher's words were "non-conductors" ; *i.e.*, they prevent the truth from being understood and taking effect. Many a truth is lost for want of the right word to express it; others are crushed beneath a pile of useless adjectives ; while others are shut up in hopeless imprisonment through violation of every law of common grammar. Talleyrand's definition

of language may here be applied in a way he did not intend, when he defined it as "the art of concealing one's thoughts."

As ministers profess to be educated men, the style of their composition will be a good proof of that profession.

It is an easy thing with some to write and speak with grace and elegance. It is a talent or gift with which they were born, or the result of careful training at home and school. Others have had no early advantages, and to these it is no small task to break careless habits and to acquire such as are elegant and correct. To such we offer these suggestions :

1. Elegance and correctness of style can be cultivated by continuous reading and study of the best authors. This should not be confined to sermons or religious books, but extend to all departments of literature.

2. Writing for the public press will beget the proper care, offer a strong motive, and afford the necessary practice in acquiring a good style of composition. You will be more careful how you write for the public eye than you will be in private correspondence.

3. Mingling with educated and cultured people. The topics of conversation, their manner of conversation, and your own care to express yourself well in their presence, will be of excellent service. It is a great gain to a clergyman, not only in improving his speech, but in many ways, to mingle freely with the best educated people in the place where he resides. This can readily be done without neglecting any pastoral duties to the humbler classes.

4. Cultivate and maintain a religious frame of mind. Its elevating and ennobling tendency and effect will be manifest in the composition as well as the delivery of sermons. The best and greatest sermons are spiritual rather than intellectual, and this can come only from a devout mind.

Style in language may be divided into three parts; the choice of words, their arrangement into sentences, and their ornamentation.

1. The choice of words. A man's style depends largely on the sort of words he uses. They should be clean, clear, and clever. A clear and forcible style cannot be produced with ambiguous words, nor a polished style with words which are vulgar and coarse.

In the choice of proper words you may be aided by observing the following features or tests.

(a.) Propriety. By this is meant such words only should be used as are proper and suitable for the pulpit. Solomon says "a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver," and also states "the preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth. The words of the wise are as goads and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies."

H. W. Beecher is reported as saying he "would pick a word out of the gutter if he could knock a sinner down with it." *Eut* knocking sinners down is not the best method of conversion, and words whereby they are overcome are the mighty words of Scripture, and not such as are picked from gutters. Pul-

pit language should not be stiff and stilted, but it should always be dignified. It may be common and homely, but never coarse or low. Our speech, says Paul, should "be always seasoned with salt," meaning thereby, not that it should be spicy, but wholesome. One reason why sermons against popular sins often fail in effect, is owing to the fact that such sins are described in coarse or slang phrases which have a humorous intent, instead of words of sober and solemn rebuke.

: To *quote* slang, coarse, or profane language in order to rebuke it, is decidedly wrong and should never be done. The people know what you mean without you quoting it, and your refusal to mention such words gives additional power to your rebuke.

The law of propriety can never be violated with impunity, whether it be in our conduct or our speech.

(b.) Accuracy and Precision. To be precise, exact, and accurate in the use of words is an attainment as valuable as it is rare. It is a great thing in composition to use the right word in the right place. Accuracy avoids the use of wrong words. Many words are very similar in sound which are very different in sense. Some use the word observance when they mean observance; consciousness when they mean conscience; respectfully when they mean respect; forward when they mean forward; ingenious when they mean ingenious, etc. Words of nearly the same meaning are carelessly employed; and they speak of religion when they mean holiness; hope when they mean assurance; conversion when they mean

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regeneration, etc. Carelessness in this respect gives the impression the speaker uses words he does not understand.

Precision avoids redundancy of words. Its very derivation from *præcido*, means to cut off, to pare down. Some preachers employ a multitude of words, thinking thereby to make themselves better understood, whereas they are doing the very opposite. They should remember the Lord's rebuke of Job, "who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?.. Every unnecessary word in a sentence introduces some new idea or feeling whereby the mind of the hearer is diverted or confused. Polish is gained not by adding anything, but by *removing* whatever obscures.

To be accurate therefore is to select and employ such words as will best express our meaning, and to be precise is to avoid multiplying words, and the use of such as are ambiguous in their meaning.

This rule applies with special force to themes and heads of discourse in preaching, where accuracy and precision are indispensable, but should be constantly observed in all parts of the sermon.

c. **Purity.** Two things are included in this rule :-the first of which is that our words be good English. The careful use of English words and idioms should be the aim of all who preach in the English language. Many of our preachers have been reared and educated in communities whose language is a mixture of English and German. Such will need to exercise special care to avoid some terms or expressions to which they have been accustomed,

and to use only such as are pure English or pure German.

The English language is the most composite of any spoken language, and calls to its aid all others to form its words. Hence even those who have been reared in English-speaking communities, need to observe this rule of purity, so as to avoid as far as possible words of foreign extraction. Many of our most familiar words are from the Latin, but have become so thoroughly *anglicized*, as to be considered good English. This is especially the case with our theological phraseology, and it is nigh impossible to preach a sermon in which such words as inspiration, sanctification, regeneration, etc., do not frequently occur. Their use is therefore not only admissible but often unavoidable.

Nevertheless it remains a fact, such words do not have the strength of words purely Anglo-Saxon. To beg is a stronger word than to supplicate; to quit, than to relinquish; to mix, than to commingle; to search, than to investigate; and to die, than to expire. The strength and charm of Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" lies largely in his use of the short words of pure English; and his style is well worthy of study and imitation.

Purity of style also excludes all words which are offensive to good taste. The preacher is a public teacher, and he has no right to use words which are not recognized by good authorities, but are coined to suit the occasion. Nor has he a right to employ language which suggests impure thoughts or imagery, or whatever may defile. Also that sort of religious

phraseology known as *cant* and *rant*, and which used to be regarded in some places as a mark of inspiration, must be avoided if purity of style is desired.

2. **The arrangement of words into sentences.**

The proper combination or arrangement of words into sentences is as important to a good style as is their selection, and much that has already been said under the choice of words, will apply with equal force here.

The following rules should be observed:

a. The arrangement must be grammatically correct. We call attention to several violations of the rules of grammar, sometimes heard in pulpits:

(a.) The use of plural verbs, pronouns, etc., with collective nouns in the singular.

*E.g.*, "The congregation *are* invited," etc., or "will hold *their* annual meeting." If the plural form of the verb or pronoun is preferred, it should be "the members of the congregation are," etc.

(b.) The use of the personal pronoun in the objective form after the verb" is."

*E.g.*, "It is me," or "him," instead of "it is I," or "he."

(c.) The use of the verb" was," with the subjunctive.

*E.g.*, "If I was," or "if you was," instead of "if I were" or "you were." See in Heb. v: 8, "Though He *were* a Son," etc.

(d.) Using the past tense in what is continuous.

*E.g.*, "I told them who I was,"-instead of "who I am."

Or using the present tense for what is future.

*E.g.*, "As next Sunday *is* Easter,"-instead of "will be Easter."

§ b. Every sentence should have perspicuity. The clearness of its meaning will depend largely on the arrangement of its words. The aim of every public speaker should be to be understood, and so to construct his sentences that his hearers not only may, but must understand him. To this end

¶ (a.) Avoid mixed sentences. Do not include too many qualifying words, phrases, and parentheses. If these are necessary, it is much better to put them into separate sentences.

(b.) Where qualifying words must be used, place them as near as you can to the word they qualify. Much ambiguity is caused by the neglect of this rule.

(c.) Perspicuity is gained by short sentences, and hence long sentences should be avoided. Short sentences arrest attention, and please the mind because readily grasped. Short sentences, however, are not always clear, as they may be too much compressed to be easily understood by the uneducated mind. What is spoken to the ear must necessarily be more full and explanatory, than what is written for the eye. But where such ampler statements are necessary, they should follow in other sentences, rather than be crowded into the sentence they are to explain.

(d.) Attempts at perspicuity may be carried too far. Explaining what has been already clearly stated, is not only unnecessary but tiresome, and is a serious blemish to a speaker's

style. Too many lenses may magnify an object until it is more obscure than to the unaided eye.

c. A sentence should have unity. Each sentence should express but one thought, state but one proposition, and leave but one impression. This secures unity even when its language has every proper variety.

This law of style is violated

(a.) When the subject is changed before the sentence is finished.

(b.) When things unconnected are put in the same sentence.

(c.) When too many explanatory words are introduced.

d. Sentences should be vigorous in style. The ancients called this energy. Words can be so combined in sentences as to impart a special force in their utterance. Even a commonplace thought or familiar truth gains new interest and force, when expressed in clever and vigorous language. Much will depend on our use of vigorous words, but much also on the way we put them together. A vigorous style comes chiefly from a careful and continued study of the science of language, and familiarity with the best writers; but we may call special attention to the following points:

(a.) Unnecessary words weaken a sentence, and should be excluded.

(b.) Avoid circumlocution. Come to the point and say what you mean. A directness of aim and purpose gives energy to speech.

(c.) Observe the rules of emphasis even in composition, and put the strong word in the right place. Be careful with the last word *c*!

every important sentence, and close with a word on which the thought can rest, and which does not cripple the voice.

(d.) Energy of style comes also from deep emotion. No man can be a strong speaker without strong feeling. Goethe's words, "*Gefuehl ist alles,*" may be an over-statement, but are founded in truth. And it is the love of Christ, deep and strong within us, which not only constrains us to preach, but makes our preaching vigorous and effective.

e. Let the style of composition be **hopeful and bright**, not pessimistic nor condemnatory. Like the Master, come to save men's lives, not to destroy them. Some ministers never present even the most helpful and comforting truths of the gospel, except in a fault-finding way.

Here we also may state no preacher should spoil his sermons by bringing into them personal grievances or indulging in pulpit scoldings. It is not only unbecoming, but injurious. It injures the gospel you ought to preach, and puts yourself at a great disadvantage. The extent of your trouble is the importance you attach to it yourself. Never show you are hurt when you are hit, for men will soon stop hitting those they cannot hurt.