

Developing a Topical Sermon

From Text to Sermon

by William E. Jones

INTRODUCTION

In the history of preaching, topical sermons have outnumbered all the other types of sermons. Among messages that have become famous almost every one has belonged to this sermon type. Today, the trend is toward more textual or expository sermons, but the topical sermon will not disappear. Every preacher, therefore, needs to master this technique of building a sermon.

I. DEFINITION

T. Harwood Pattison divides sermons into three classes: the topical sermon, in which the theme is especially prominent; the textual sermon, in which more regard is paid to the words of the text; and the expository sermon, in which, as a rule, a larger portion of the Bible is taken as the basis for the discourse.¹ Some question the final two divisions, since the difference lies in the length of the text. Also, textually speaking, the topical sermon develops a theme which must be anchored in a text as the sermon grows. Some point out the difficulty of clearly differentiating sermon types, although this study will endeavor to recognize them.

Donald G. Miller approaches the types by a definition of expository preaching.

Expository preaching is an act wherein the living truth of some portion of Holy Scripture, understood in the light of solid exegetical and historical study and made a living reality to the preacher by the Holy Spirit, comes alive to the hearer as he is confronted by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit in judgment and redemption.²

Commenting on his own definition, Miller remarks: "If this broad definition of expository preaching be accepted, then it remains true that *all* real preaching is expository preaching: if a pulpit discourse does not embody the elements included in our definition, it can hardly be classed as a sermon, but becomes rather a lecture or an address."³ Growing out of a great respect for

Donald G. Miller, I am inclined to agree with his assessment: It is not always easy to clearly and meaningfully divide sermons into neat, airtight classifications. However, he may overlook the fact that beginning with a text may achieve different results than beginning with a subject and vice versa.

With the preceding thoughts in mind, consider the following as a definition for topical preaching: A topical sermon means one whose form grows out of the words and ideas of the subject. "The topical sermon, it should be remembered, is one in which the theme is drawn from the text, but discussed independently of the text."⁴ "This type of sermon consists of choosing a certain subject, or topic, and then searching through all the Scriptures to discover what light can be thrown on the subject under consideration. The great doctrines of the Bible would come under this classification."⁵ Gibbs illustrates by saying that the topic, or theme, is like a river, and all the Scriptures that throw light upon the topic are like the tributaries that flow into the river. He further adds that every topical sermon must have the qualities of unity, coherence, and emphasis.⁶

II. ADVANTAGES

Every type of sermon has distinctive advantages over other types. The topical sermon is no exception.

First, it allows a thorough examination of any theme or subject. While the Bible is not written as a systematic theology (a collection of texts brought together on a single biblical doctrine), doctrinal considerations fill its pages. Bringing related texts together under a theme is a valuable way of studying Scripture. In fact, if such a method did not exist there would be a crying need for it (to consider doctrines such as God, Christ, inspiration, salvation, etc.).

Second, it permits breadth of treatment. The preacher feels free to "roam around" in the text,

looking for passages that develop his subject. Once such a search is made, the man of God may choose to develop the subject broadly, touching only main divisions, or he may choose to develop only a part of what the Bible says on that topic (e.g., on baptism, he may wish to deal only with the purpose and leave the discussion of mode for another sermon). The topic may simply be phrased "The Purpose of Baptism." A lengthier discussion of titles is upcoming.

Third, it enables the preacher to impress his hearers with the unity of the Bible. A poorly planned topical sermon may result in three or four "sermonettes" in a single period, but let the preacher strive for unity of presentation. The topic should become a "guiding star" for the whole of the presentation. As the preacher compares one text with another, the unity of God's Word becomes obvious.

Fourth, it most easily affords the use of a series of sermons on a single subject, allowing for a thorough treatment of the subject.

III. DISADVANTAGES

Great pulpiteers have anticipated potential weaknesses in the topical approach.

Topical preaching may encourage a nonreligious approach to the subject. Or, put negatively, it may lead to a neglect of the Word of God. There is enough pulpit work devoid of religion without the method contributing to secularism. But it must be insisted that the fault lies more with the preacher and his material than it does with the method itself.

The great preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick struggled with and anticipated this potential weakness. He noted that while textual sermons lend to authority, topical sermons may not. Many preachers search out contemporary life and the newspapers for subjects, not the Bible, Fosdick observed. Instead of beginning with the text, they start with their own ideas on some subject of their choice. Such ideas range far from the Bible turning pulpits into platforms and sermons into lectures. He should think first of all of his people's needs, not his own ideas. "Nothing that he says on any subject, however wise and important, matters much unless it makes at the beginning vital contact with the practical life and daily thinking of the audience."⁷

However, an observant preacher may ask if the needs and interests of people are not touched upon by newspapers, etc. The source of the topic could come from any source, but the preacher must remember that the subject is to be grounded in the text. Fosdick's warning seems appropriate for the less than careful preacher.

It must be observed, however, that even Fosdick had trouble avoiding this pitfall. In 1918, commenting on World War I, he said, "We must win the war for this world has no hope with a triumphant Germany, and if Christianity does not stop the war it will have failed." Billy Sunday had the same problem. "If you turn hell upside down, you will find 'Made in Germany' stamped on the bottom." Fosdick later swore never to bless war again after World War I. In 1939, he said that the church must abide by Jesus' ethics, which entails not merely "ordinary humane decency, loving those who love us, but the radical sometimes incredible demands of Jesus that we love our enemies, that if smitten on the one cheek we turn the other instead, that we do good to those who hate us and pray for those who spitefully use us and persecute us."⁸

Fosdick's preaching definitely took on a man-centered direction in his later career. He argued that Christianity was intrinsically a progressive religion (the "becoming" of the human being). The essential genius of Christianity for Fosdick was its ability to throw light on the endless possibilities in man.⁹ *On Being a Real Person* amounts to an early version of the "self-help" book. For him anxiety and fear are conquered by self-acceptance and self-love. Perpetual growth toward wholeness is the goal of every person. Growth is indeed an intrinsic part of the Christian life, but seems to have been viewed as insufficient. Here is a case in point of a preacher who vowed to remain with the text but found current thinking too strong to resist. Let the preacher be warned.

If the preacher is too broad in his planning the sermon may lack interest. The doctrine of God may be stated as dealing with His omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. This may leave most of the audience cold, however. On the other hand, God as lovingkindness, God as great, or God as judge convey more readily.

Improper use of the topical sermon may leave people unfed. Newspaper accounts lack nourishment unless carefully grounded in an appropri-

ate biblical text. Care should be taken so that topical sermons contain more labor than cleverness or insight into the latest best seller. Following the latest trends can be very misleading to both preacher and congregation.

It is concluded that if a preacher recognizes the advantages of a topical sermon and is careful to avoid the pitfalls just mentioned, his message can be strong and vital. Misuse of the method does not invalidate it.

IV. NAMING THE TOPICAL SERMON

Do not assume that “slapping a title” on your sermon will serve either man or church well. If the subject properly phrased is your lode star, give a lot of attention to its phrasing.

The phrasing of a sermon topic should indicate its importance and the preacher’s respect for the text. “Sensation” sermon titles may get a laugh, but they will not magnify the importance of the pulpit. For example, “The Peril of Looking Back” bodes well for a sermon on Lot’s wife, while “A Salty Sister” makes the preacher’s effort seem less significant. “Why Martyrdom Is Preferable to Apostasy” (Daniel 3, on the lives of Daniel’s three friends) is decidedly preferable to “Three Asbestos Jews Who Would Neither Bow, Budge, nor Burn.” “How Spring Comes to the Soul” (John 11:25, 26), “Why We Believe Christ’s Deity” (Colossians 1:15ff.), and “Why We Worship Christ” (Revelation 5:6-14) lead in the right direction. Great sermons such as “Every Man’s Life a Plan of God” (by Horace Bushnell) and “Forgiveness of Sins” (by Harry Emerson Fosdick) help today’s preachers secure better sermon topics.

Andrew W. Blackwood offers some suggestions for naming the sermon.¹⁰ (1) Nothing is as important as the topic except for the text. (2) A religious topic tells the truth, while a secular one may be a misnomer. (3) A doctrinal sermon topic should show the purpose of the lesson. (4) In a teaching sermon the name should strive for clarity, or it will not teach. (5) Do what your topic promises—be honest. (6) A doctrinal sermon bearing on human needs should be well phrased—make it glow. (7) Do not choose a topic that will be as stale as last week’s toast, and be sure to avoid the sensational. (8) Phrase a title early, but let the final form wait until the completion of the sermon. (9) Allow a teaching topic to

run longer than one that inspires, and use no more than four big words. (10) Plan for variety, except in a series.

V. APPLICATION

It goes without saying that a good topical sermon requires good illustrations. However, there is even a more crying need for proper applications of the text for today’s audience. Blackwood quotes a lawyer’s observations about good preaching:

We laymen get fed with pretty sermonettes about the beauty of leaves and birds. We want to hear about God and men, sin and salvation, heaven and hell. We wish to know what to believe about Christ’s Deity, and what difference it makes to us on Main Street. It helps a man like me to keep straight and clean from Monday morning through Saturday night when he feels sure of Christ as the Son of God.¹¹

The importance of application to a good sermon is stated in the words “. . . what difference it makes to us on Main Street.” Much modern preaching explains the text in its own context, but fails to tell the audience what it can do for them in their daily lives. This is one of the greatest weaknesses in today’s sermons. The five chapter titles in Leslie Weatherhead’s *The Resurrection and the Life* illustrate this item in good preaching:

- I. Christ Is Risen
- II. Christ Is Alive Today
- III. Christ Offers Life Now
- IV. Christ Offers Life Hereafter
- V. Christ Is Relevant to Life Today

FOOTNOTES

¹T. Harwood Pattison, *The Making of the Sermon* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1898), p. 53.

²Donald G. Miller, *The Way to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), p. 26.

³*Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴Wilson T. Hogue, *A Handbook of Homiletics and Pastoral Theology* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Free Methodist Publishing House, 1949).

⁵Alfred P. Gibbs, *The Preacher and His Preaching* (Fort Dodge, Iowa: Walterick Printing Co., n.d.), p. 268.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Lionel G. Crocker, ed., *Harry Emerson Fosdick’s Art of Preaching* (Springfield, Ill.: Thomas, 1971), p. 32.

⁸DeWitte T. Holland, ed., *Preaching in American History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), p. 244.

⁹Harry Emerson Fosdick, *As I See Religion* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932), pp. 44ff.

¹⁰Andrew W. Blackwood, *Doctrinal Preaching for Today* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956, Baker, 1975), pp. 158, 159.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 157.

ILLUSTRATIONS

On Rising Early

For thirty-five years Dr. Albert Barnes preached at the First Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia. During this time he produced commentaries on every New Testament book, as well as several on the Old Testament. When he decided to write these books, he wondered how his preaching for such a large church would permit time for this additional labor. He solved the problem by doing all his writing before breakfast. By rising regularly between four and five o'clock in the morning he spent the hours before breakfast in writing. By nine o'clock he was

ready for a full day's work at his study.

Money Is Not Always the Answer

A cartoon by Howie Schnieder pictures a young man hanging from a tall cliff by his fingertips. A man comes along and sees his plight. "Need a little assistance, young fellow?" With a sigh of relief the young man answers, "Boy, do I." The older man takes out his wallet. "Would five bucks help any?" he asks.

There are some people who believe that money will solve any problem. Parents often meet their children's material needs but miss their real problem. Mission works are floundering because we have felt in the past that we need only write out a check once a month.

©Copyright, 1985, 2004 by Truth for Today
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED