

Where Are You Going, Preacher?

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At a recent workshop for Sunday school teachers, one teacher was promoting visual aids. She had placed before us a chart, a cone-shaped drawing which pictured how a teacher's impact on the class expands with visual aids. At the broad bottom of the cone was the happy teacher who is able to fix her every word and concept upon the minds of the pupils. At the top of the cone—in the least effective position—stood the solitary teacher speaking to his class without benefit of flannelgraph, flipchart, filmstrip, or movie. The teacher who was presenting the cone-chart spoke her condolences to the long-faced pastors in ' the audience. Lonely figures were we—there at the top of the cone!

Are the educators right? Should preaching be despised as a form of communication? Is the preacher on the way out? To many people today the preacher is "a pathetic figure—an inoffensive little man jostled by the crowd, and wearing the expression of a startled rabbit... The crowd pushes him from the sidewalk; the traffic shoots him back into the crowd. Some curse him; a few laugh; most are unaware of his existence."ⁱ It would appear that the preacher and his preaching are simply not making an impact in today's world.

It's not only the prospective listeners who are disenchanted with preaching. Jay Adams tells of "a homiletics professor at one famous liberal seminary who claims that no one comes to chapel to hear a preacher anymore: 'You can only get them out to hear a combo,' he said. Another professor of preaching said that of 113 entering Juniors, only six elected the course in preaching."ⁱⁱ But can you blame seminarians for their disinterest? Haven't they spent some twenty years sitting in churches in which the preachers often showed little enthusiasm for the pulpit? The young man who has been put to sleep by preaching vows to preach better or not at all! And which of us would deny that "not at all" is the more realistic goal to attain?

W. E. Sangster says:

"There are preachers who are drifting toward disbelief in preaching themselves. Indeed, some of them make no effort to disguise it. 'I'm no entertainer,' they say, with the sly insinuation that any man preaching to more than a handful must be employing some unworthy technique. 'Thank God I'm no popular preacher!' say others, with the inverted vanity of those who want to imply that their preaching is not so popular because it is so deep."ⁱⁱⁱ

He puts his finger on a sore spot. No matter how the preacher explains his lack of success, he is painfully aware that the sheep are not flocking to hear his sermons.

"Ours is a day of fallen kingdoms; the earth is littered with their debris. Is the pulpit also toppling?" asks George A. Buttrick.^{iv} With all the bullets being fired at preachers, we ought to have the decency to fall down dead! But here we are! And we're here for the same reasons as others before us.

Paul knew that the world in its wisdom would look on preaching as foolishness. But he preached—from one end of the Great Sea to the other. Luther moaned: "It is true, according to reason, God is the greatest of all fools for taking care of His cause with the Word and the sermon...There is so much ingratitude and contempt in the world, and such terrible blasphemy of God's word besides, that a pious preacher is finally loathe to preach another word."^v .But he preached—as many as 200 sermons a year! We are attuned to the music of the world which drums out the message that preaching is passe'. But we preach—every Sunday and many other days.

In spite of the heaped-up evidence against preaching, both Paul and Luther set their sights and mapped out their goals. With single-mindedness of purpose they dogged their objectives. There lies the secret to Christian preaching--setting the sights and mapping out the goals. Too much preaching fails because the preacher has not clarified his objectives and goals. This paper thrusts in that direction. Let me pose the question:

WHERE ARE YOU GOING, PREACHER?

I With all your sermons

II With each sermon

III With the words in your sermons

I

Many a goal is unattained because the starting point is wrong. An Olympic sprinter might have his heart set on breaking the tape ahead of all others. But if he goes to the starting blocks on the practice track outside instead of the main track inside the stadium, he will not attain his goal. What is the starting point for the preacher? How can he be sure he is on the right track? The preacher can be sure he is going in the right direction with all his preaching if he starts with the importance of preaching.

The importance of preaching—the preacher must be clear on that, though his lot is cast in an age with little more than amused contempt for preaching. The preacher, if he is to be effective in the pulpit, must be convinced that what he is doing is vital, that it makes a difference. If the preacher mounts his pulpit harboring the thought that his work is insignificant, it will be!

What accounts for the importance of preaching? What makes it necessary? First, God has commanded it. "Go!" says God, "Preach!" What Christian preacher can sidestep that? In stark honesty St. Paul wrote "When I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (I Cor. 9:16) Luther admitted: "Not that we are so greatly delighted to preach. For, to speak for myself, no message would be more pleasing to my ears than the one deposing me from the office of preaching. But ... there is a man whose name is Jesus Christ."^{vi} Luther was often upset at the way people treated the preached word, but he said, "We must swallow our disgust and overcome it and constantly take comfort in the thought that we did not begin for their sakes and shall not stop because of them."^{vii}

Because God has commanded preaching, the preacher cannot hold back. Buttrick put it this way:

"The conviction of God cannot be withheld: it bursts any prison ... The tides do not truckle. The stars do not apologize for invading the sky. There is in the prophet's soul an inevitable swing of the Spirit's tides, an oncoming as of starry hosts --he MUST speak his word... Not that it can ever be his arrogance; it is the conviction of his sin. It is his burden, his doom, and his exceeding joy. He must tell what he has seen."^{viii}

He must! It is important! God has said so.

Preaching is important and necessary, second, because of the needs of the people. The people have been made small in our times. Washington has reduced each man and woman to a number in a Social Security system; business has shrunk each person into a "bleep" that lasts but a millisecond on a computer; evolution has relegated each one's threescore-and-ten to but a wink in time. Preaching can exalt the worth of people. Buttrick observed: "Jesus told his twelve friends that they were the light of the world, though they seemed but candles flickering in the smoke of their prejudice. He told them they were so precious in the sight of heaven, that God would search His planet-cottage with unwearying scrutiny should they ever be lost."^{ix}

Perhaps more than at any other time in history people are seeking stark honesty in answer to their questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is the meaning of life? Is there life after death? Can I be sure? Aside from a few psychologists and philosophers who are willing to buck the mainstream of their professions, who but the preacher is addressing these questions?

In spite of the surface linament of affluence, the deep-down ache of humanity persists. Shooting pain sears our people.

"The preacher whose imagination is quick will find enough suffering in any congregation to leave him awestruck... He will perhaps have the strange imagining of everybody in his church coming down the aisle to cast his burden on the chancel in front of the cross—the man of bitter memory forever excavating his own heart, the mother who has recently stood by an open grave, the father out of work, the employer sorrowful because he must throw men out of work, the young woman for whom circumstance has closed the door of her talent and who must now be content with a second-best endeavor, and the elderly man who tomorrow must lie on an operating table. Down that aisle they come, showing of what courageous stuff our humanity is made, piling up their burdens on the chancel floor until the black heap lifts the roof and makes its own entreaty to the sky. If the preacher has not been visited by some such imagining it were better for him that he should not preach! "x

To be able to speak a sure word of God to suffering souls is an honor of which no man truly worthy.^{xi} Can there be any doubt of the need for preaching? Preaching is important! The needs of the people say so.

Preaching is important and necessary, third, because the pulpit has the widest exposure to our people. Of all the ways we have of reaching out to our people, the pulpit affords us the greatest opportunities. For each one of us, it's before the pulpit that the greatest numbers of people gather with the greatest frequency.

We might wish it otherwise. We might feel in our bones that we are better at the bedside than in the pulpit, better in the classroom than in the pulpit, better in the one-on-one situation than in the pulpit, better in administration than in the pulpit. Maybe so, but the pulpit is still where our greatest opportunities lie. To be weak in the pulpit is to undermine the other phases of the work as well.

We have inherited this primacy of the pulpit from a long history. In the early Christian churches preaching played a prominent role. Schaff informs us that in the Apostolic Church's preaching "Christ crucified and risen was the luminous center, whence a sanctifying light was shed on all the relations of life. Gushing forth from a full heart, this preaching went to the heart; and springing from an inward life, it kindled life—a new, divine life—in the susceptible hearers."^{xii}

That strong reliance on preaching to win and hold souls continued for many generations until it was eroded by the Mass. In fact, in the Middle Ages many priests were incapable of writing and delivering a sermon!

The people of God suffered, parched, straining for a drink from the fountain of preaching. Only a few drops came. Then the fountain began to flow again, and in the Reformation it gushed! We Lutheran pastors have inherited a pulpit from which God's people have a right to expect the pure water of preaching to bubble forth in abundant supply.

We have encouraged people's expectations of the pulpit. Regarding this, Sangster expresses the sobering thought:

"But being a shepherd isn't the same as being a sheep dog! Caring for people doesn't mean fussing around them in the morning hours when a man should be in study and on his knees. Collecting a congregation by assiduous visiting, but having no sure word from God when they come together in worship, is only to disappoint their expectations one has aroused, and to fail in a task so solemn and exalted that no part of our duty can exceed its importance "^{xiii}

Is he saying that we should neglect pastoral and mission calls? Not at all. He means: "A man in any normal ministerial situation tempted to put the emphasis on one of these tasks to the exclusion of the other might well listen to his Master's word: 'This ought ye to have done, and not leave the other undone.'"^{xiv} Preaching is important! The prominence of the pulpit in our Lutheran scheme says so.

Preaching is important. Discussion as to whether we want less or more preaching is sterile. Better preaching is our need!

How do we arrive at the goal of better preaching? The means is the Word of God. The Word of God is our God-given tool in all our preaching. And what a tool! The Word of God is a hammer and a two-edged sword. The Word is light and life. The Word is like rain and fire. The Word is a rock, a staff, good seed, and bread. The Word is sweeter than honey and better than gold. What a fine tool we hold in our hands, we preachers!

But notice that the Word of God is the tool—the means to our goal in all our sermons—not the goal itself. Here we can easily go astray in the pursuit of our goal. We take a text and apply to it careful exegesis and painstaking hermeneutics. We wrestle with the text until we pin it to the mat. Finally the stubborn truth gives itself up; we breathe a sigh of relief and imagine that we are now ready to preach God's Word to His people. We think the goal is won. It is not! We have only understood the means to the goal. That understanding is a necessary preparation for valid Christian preaching, but it does not make the preaching. What so challenged us in the study may come off dull in the pulpit.

In our first building program at St. Mark's I gladly took my toolbox to church for the work. But I secretly winced as I saw my chisels chipped and saws dulled. Tools require proper use. You can't simply beat with them on the material. That sense of proper use ought to be especially keen when we pick up the tool in our preaching. It's not enough that the preacher understand the word: he must transfer that understanding to the people. The preacher cannot simply beat with the Word upon God's people. It is his responsibility to so wield the tool that he works his way through the stubborn knots of the people's preoccupations. It is his task to guide the tool through the crooked grain of their ignorance. It is His calling to apply the tool at the points in their lives which will result in a shaping and building up of the material that God has entrusted to him.

Another misuse of the word into which we can easily fall is preaching ABOUT the word instead of preaching the word. Perhaps in a high school woodshop there is room for the instructor to talk about a tool. Elsewhere talking should cease and applying the tool to material should commence. Maybe we fall into this error because in our preacher shops we spend so much time talking about the tool. After all, it IS an awe-inspiring tool. But talking about the tool does not build and shape God's material.

We sense that we are getting near the goal in all our preaching. Like at the first whiff of sea air after driving through the smog of the city, our senses perk up. The goal in all our sermons—from the moment we sit down to the text in the beginning of the week to the tension-filled moment when we mount the pulpit—what is it? Not simply to fill the air with words for 15 or 20 minutes. Not even to fill it with God's Word; that's the means, not the goal.

The goal in all our sermons is simple. Caemmerer stated it this way: "The word which sums up all the goals of preaching is repentance. 'Repent ye!' was the cry of John the Baptist, of the Lord Jesus, and of the apostles to their hearers ... God wants His people to turn His way."^{xv} Preaching should have the goal of turning people in their hearts and in the fruit of their hearts. Preaching should make a difference in the life and destiny of people. If the preacher does not sit down to his task hoping and praying for that, why sermonize? If the preacher does not step before his people believing that preaching makes a difference, why preach?

But aren't there times when some form of repentance, of change, is too high a goal to expect? To be sure, God called Moses to preach to Pharaoh, saying in the same breath: Pharaoh will not listen to you. Yes, Moses was justified in preaching without expecting repentance. But until God points out to us that we are preaching to people whom He Himself is hardening, our goal must be a positive one. God has called us "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up." (Eph 4:28) How can that be accomplished if we do not preach to the goal of repentance, of turning the hearts and minds of God's people?

Preaching to the goal of repentance means challenging God's people. Buttrick said:

"Preaching is rooted in the fact that our race has always been haunted by a sense of Another-- Another spelled with a capital "A"... Our race has always understood the mood of the African chief who, when asked about his belief in God, replied: 'We know that at nighttime Somebody goes among the trees, but we never speak of it.' Somebody goes by among the trees. Some body flames in the

dawn and stirs in the tremor of springtime. Somebody lifts a challenge in our conscience, like a banner unfurled.^{xvi}

As Somebody's preachers it is our calling to sound His challenges, leaving no doubt in our hearers' minds as to Who is challenging them. In such preaching God's people recognize the voice of their Maker and Redeemer calling them to turn to Him, to change their thinking, to believe differently, to alter their actions. It's preaching that longs and aches to make a difference in people—and believes that it will make a difference!

Where are you going, preacher? If, in all your sermons, your aim is to lead God's people to repentance, you are going in the right direction.

II

If it is necessary for the preacher to know where he is going with all his sermons, so it is necessary for him to know where he is going with each sermon. As all his sermons have the general goal of repentance, so each sermon has a specific goal. Jay Adams teaches:

"Each sermon has a general and specific purpose, a telic dimension that involves a *telos* toward which, out of which and around which all the sermon moves. The word *telos* means 'the goal, purpose, end or aim.' The telic note should be the unifying factor in every sermon, without exception."^{xvii}

The fault of the sermon that ignores the need for one goal is revealed by the searching questions that are always lurking under the surface.

"So what? What difference does it make? What is at issue here? That is what the preacher has not answered for himself. But these are just the questions which the listener has been asking from the beginning. The listener will get some answer from what the preacher says or implies, or he will make one up for himself."^{xviii}

The trouble is, his conclusion may not be what the preacher hoped for!

How does the preacher determine the goal for his sermon? First, study the text. To be sure, the preacher often has a goal of sorts in mind before he studies the text. In those cases studying the text will reveal whether his idea of the goal and the Holy Spirit's goal are the same. If not, he must change either his goal or his text. The safest way to operate is to approach the text with no goal in mind and let the text speak for itself. Adams observes: "To discover the Holy Spirit's *telos* is the reason for our exegetical work. Some people seem to think that exegesis exists in a vacuum for itself. But exegesis is incomplete without the telic note."^{xix} Following the exegesis comes interpreting the text. This is greatly aided by outlining and dividing the text along its natural lines.

The second step in determining the goal for the sermon is: Study the people. As Al Young would say, sermons have to get down into the lives of the people. If the preacher's sermon is going to have a goal that gets down into the lives of the people, he has to study the people. Their involvement in his congregation is only a part of their lives--a tiny part in too many cases! Sermons that constantly aim at church related goals will miss the greater part of people's lives. In order to avoid that the preacher has to know that greater part of their lives. He has to meet them when they hurt, when they eat, when they work, when they play. "The minister who knows the books on his shelves better than the human volumes in his parish will not for long preach with authority."^{xx} In short, the preacher must get to know Helen and Harry as well as he knows Isaiah and Paul, if he wants the goal of each sermon to be REAL to his people.

Some may be concerned that placing so much emphasis on the goal of the sermon fosters emotionalism and persuasion apart from the gentle pull of the Holy Spirit. On that subject Adams speaks out:

"Some persons try to be more pious than Paul; but their piety is false. They say that persuasion in preaching is unnecessary and the implication, therefore, is that those who use persuasion ignore the Holy Spirit and depend upon the arm of the flesh. 'Simply present the facts,' they maintain, 'and let the Holy Spirit do the rest.'"^{xxi}

It appears to me that Sangster is on the right track with these words:

"Feeling is, at least, a third of this complex thing we call human personality. To imagine that guilty sinners on their way to the cross must be forbidden all expressions of emotion, or that forgiven sinners returning from the cross must be denied a vent to the rapture in their souls, is to ask the impossible and to make nonsense of life in doing so."^{xxii}

It is impossible to avoid the use of emotion in preaching. It is there! In determining the goal of the sermon we have to ask: "What is to be the mental and emotional relationship between the preacher and the people? How are the little tendrils of personality which reach out from one to another to touch, engage, and hold firm?"^{xxiii} The question is: How much emotional appeal should the goal suggest? Broadus says, "The ignorant use emotional appeal too much, while the cultured use it too little."^{xxiv} My own feeling is that if we determine our sermon goal first by studying the text, then by studying the people, we will not become more emotional than the Holy Spirit would want us to be.

Once the goal of the sermon is clear, how does the preacher transfer the goal to the mind of his people? The mind operates with ideas. Each sermon needs an idea. Call it a theme, or a proposition, if you will but be alert that it be not simply a subject. The mind does not zero in on subjects alone; it focuses on ideas. And each idea has both a subject and a predicate. As soon as the mind hears a subject, it wants to know: "What about the subject? What's predicated of it? What's the idea?" Davis states:

"Not many thoughts can be developed and shared in one sermon. If the preacher tries to cover too broad a subject, he will say too much, too many good things, and will not share even one of them with his hearers. When the sermon merely discusses a broad subject without the sharpness and urgency of a keener point, it does not really convey anything of importance to its hearers."^{xxv}

Buttrick remembered making that mistake in his first two sermons:

"Well do we recall how at the end of that first Sunday, the two new sermons having been preached, we were sure that there was nothing more to be said. The gospel and the congregation were both exhausted!"^{xxvi}

According to Davis the qualities of a good sermon idea are as follows:

1. It must be narrow enough to be sharp.
2. It must have in it a force that is expanding (toward the goal).
3. It must be true.
4. It must be loaded with the realities of the human heart.
5. It must be one of the many facets of the gospel of Christ.^{xxvii}

Concerning these qualities he continues:

"These may sound like ideals—like qualities it would be well for the idea to possess if it can ... But they are not ideals. Actually, these are not ideal but functional qualities ... The power to move first

the preacher and afterward, the listener, the power to engage the heart, the imagination and will, resides in these qualities."^{xxxviii}

What preacher has not had the frustration of working through a challenging, exciting text, only to have the sermon fall flat? Davis offers this evaluation:

"A sermon is poor for one of two reasons. It may be because the idea that produced it really lacks the qualities described above. Or it may be that the idea does actually possess these qualities, but the preacher has not questioned his idea or searched for them, and so they do not come out in his treatment. An excellent treatment of a shoddy idea will not make an adequate sermon; a passable treatment of an excellent idea will."^{xxxix}

Once the preacher has determined his goal and worked out a good idea or theme, he is ready to build continuity into his sermon so that it flows from the idea to the goal.

Here is where a word about outlines is in place. We struggle to make those neat, balanced outlines, that look so prim and proper on paper. But there is a problem with many of them. Adams flies in the face of much of what we have learned about outlining:

While the text itself may afford the natural divisions for a sermon, this is not necessarily the way to structure a sermon. As a matter of fact, not one sermon recorded in the New Testament is organized along the structural lines of an Old Testament text... An outline representing the structure of the scriptural passage may be quite different from the outline from which you will preach on Sunday morning. Failure to recognize this has been a frequent cause for failure in preaching ... In outlining, then, it is not the division of the text but the content, the purpose, and the audience that first must be taken into account."^{xxx}

Davis doesn't even like to use the word outline:

"There is one compelling reason why I shall not rely on the word *outline* to designate the plan of a sermon. The conventional outline is a static and visual plan, whereas the sermon can be properly planned only as an audible movement in time."^{xxxi}

I am not suggesting that we scrap outlines—only that we keep in mind what an outline's function is: To aid in the continuity of the sermon as it flows from idea to goal. I think what our friends in the homiletics chairs are trying to share with us is: Be careful that your outlines do not force you to make two or three feeble lunges at your goal, when you want to make one strong, sharp thrust!

How do you plan that strong continuity into a sermon? How do you insure that flow from idea to goal? It's amazing how many sermon faults can be detected just by keeping that last question in mind. As the preacher structures his sermon, he can easily be taken up with a line of thought that strikes his fancy. But the preacher has to ride herd on himself. If the line of thought does not fit in the progression from idea to goal, it has no business there!

Another suggestion for structure which I ran across some years ago comes from Caemmerer. He says that a sermon should move 1) from a malady, 2) through the means, 3) to a goal.^{xxxii} Using this continuity the preacher depicts the malady, that is, the evil in human thought or action which the text or context teaches or implies. He then proclaims the gospel as the means to overcoming the malady. If he can do this using the terminology and imagery of the text, he will avoid sameness in presenting the gospel week after week. Finally the sermon ends with a strong statement of the goal. The malady/means/ goal continuity provides for a good treatment of Law and Gospel in the sermon without omitting a strong challenge to the saints.

Time spent on careful structuring of each sermon will not be wasted. Sangster says:

"Every well-made sermon has structure...It is important that the structure be there to give unity, balance, and grace to the whole. The STRENGTH of a sermon is so often in its structure. Lacking that, no fineness of phrasing or facility in illustration can ever make it up."^{xxxiii}

Davis gives his opinion on the steps the design of the sermon should follow:

- 1 Fix the goal of the sermon.
2. Choose the structural assertion that is to come first.
3. Arrange the order of the intervening points.
4. Allot each point the exact number of minutes allowed for its development."^{xxxiv}

Regarding structure Sangster's reminder is in place:

"Some preachers keep always to one kind of structure. Like a suburban builder, they have a plan that is pleasing and they use it over and over again. Who has not traveled through those dreary neighborhoods where every house is an exact replica of the one next door?... His theme being fixed, no preacher should approach his early-brooding on the subject, or his later heaped up material, with his mind already committed to one mold... Variety in structure helps to make preaching INTERESTING."^{xxxv}

If with each sermon the preacher conscientiously asks himself, "Where are you going, preacher?" chances are he can spare himself the embarrassment of having his members ask it! For if, in each sermon, he is resolutely moving in a line from idea to goal, he can reasonably expect his hearers to arrive at the same point he does.

III

Finally we come to the way in which we present our carefully researched ideas and material to our people. Jay Adams tickles the imagination:

"All of us know how desperately dull preachers can become at times when they try to teach. But the transmission of information certainly doesn't need to be dull. Rather, it can be exciting and interesting. Preachers must not become Bible butchers, chopping out great chunks of scriptural meat and throwing it raw and bloody to their congregations as if they were feeding tigers. There is nothing wrong with the meat. There is nothing wrong with the butchering process. But the preachers must also learn to become cooks as well as butchers. They must learn to serve the meat well cooked, warm, well-seasoned, garnished, with appetizer and dessert, by candlelight."^{xxxvi}

This puts us in the realm of style, of the words and combinations of words that make up all our sermons. Style cannot be avoided. The real questions are: Is your style vital and vibrant or dull and drab? Is it clear or fuzzy? Is it current and growing or outdated and stagnant? In short, is your style good or poor? In all the words of his sermons the preacher should have the goal of good style.

Pouring out waste verbiage from the pulpit just adds fuel to the fire of the critic. He says: "The preacher doesn't do anything. Buildings endure, books can be handled, bread you can eat, but words are lost as soon as spoken. To pour out words—is that a useful occupation?" How can we counter that criticism? Only by weighing and measuring our words and forcing them to serve us and our message. Buttrick claims:

"Words are personality articulated. They, more than any other tool man has made, are freighted with spirit. 'Men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.' (Matt. 12:36) And every noble word they have spoken will rise up on that day to call them blessed."^{xxxvii}

Our precious time in the pulpit is too short for us to fill the minutes with low-impact words. Fancy rhetoric, though it may please the ears of some, detracts from the impact of clear, vibrant words. At the time of Chrysostom people loved rhetoric. They had the disgusting habit of clapping and stomping when they liked a preacher's style. Chrysostom delivered a scathing sermon against that practice, blistering their ears for so degrading the word of God. But the people liked his rhetoric so much that—you guessed it—they clapped and stomped! His pulpit eloquence called attention to itself and actually detracted from the message. But, of course, the opposite is just as dangerous. Limp words, technical words, outdated words, and passive words have a low impact as well. We can ill afford either extreme.

How do we avoid the horns of this dilemma? What kind of words should it be our goal to use? Listen to Luther on the subject:

"When I preach here at Wittenberg, I descend to the lowest level. I do not look at the doctors and magistrates, of whom about forty are present, but at the hundred or thousand young people. To these I reach. If the others do not want to listen—the door is open."^{xxxviii}

And Adams:

"The base from which to operate is the *koine*, that is, the business language of modern society plus a heightening to which the subject matter of the Scriptures naturally elevates it. We move up and down from that language level according to whether we are speaking at the local ministerium or to a group of teenagers at a hot dog roast."^{xxxix}

But in choosing vocabulary for the people, be careful! Sangster warns:

"It is always dangerous for a man to despise—however secretly--the intelligence of those to whom he ministers. For one thing, he cannot keep it secret The simplest people can take the best we have to give. It requires not less but more time to get it ready: to make it plain, vivid, understandable. Their gratitude to one who will take that trouble is beautiful indeed."^{xl}

Davis offers these helpful guidelines for choosing words that are meant for the ear:

1. The preacher should learn to express himself in as few words as possible.
2. He should learn to use words that sound well together, avoiding the ly jingle and 'ity jingle.
3. He should cultivate a preference for short, strong, clear, familiar words. Anglo-Saxon words are nearer to the heart. Greek and Latin words are more discriminate. Both are needed.
4. He should cultivate a preference for sensuous rather than abstract, and specific rather than general words.
5. He should rely on strong nouns and active verbs to carry the weight of his thought.^{xli}

Packed with such words is this quote from Emerson:

"The language of the street is always strong. I confess to some pleasure from the stinging rhetoric of a rattling oath in the mouth of truckmen and teamsters. How brisk it is by the side of a page

of the North American Review. Cut these words of the street and they bleed; they are vascular and alive; they walk and run. Moreover, they who use them do not trip in their speech. Their phraseology is a shower of bullets, whilst Cambridge men correct themselves and begin anew at every half sentence."^{xlii}

Once we are in the pulpit, it is too late to work on style. What will come out will be our natural style, not the best style of which we are capable. Painstaking writing is the first step. Buttrick says:

"Only in a written sermon can the thought be clarified and diction cut until it shines with facets like a jewel... How many idle words there are in the average sermon—words that do no work, that are not felt, that are merely sound! ... The preacher must be a good shepherd of words. That good shepherding will help him to be a good shepherd of souls."^{xliii}

Taking pencil in hand like a pruning shears the preacher can cut out the suckers in his speech. They are: superlatives (if you use them too often, what will you use when something is *really* superlative?); trite, stale expressions (many of our favorites); meaningless repetitions (to be distinguished from repetition for emphasis); additives like "and so forth" which contribute nothing (more or less); weasel words (they fail to commit one when he ought to be); and run-on sentences (learn to "freckle your speech with periods").

Watch out for that comfortable jargon. Like the smell of bacon which clings to the hands for two or three hours after frying, so the familiar terminology of our commentaries hymns, Bibles, and catechism clings to our vocabulary. But unless these terms are also a meaningful part of our listeners' working vocabulary they will not convey meaning. We should also beware of cuteness and sarcasm. Did you hear about the preacher who used Paul's likeness of the Church to a body? He went beyond the analogy of the eye, hand, and foot, comparing members of his congregation to the tonsils (We are no worse off when you are gone), and the appendix (We did not know we had you till you caused us trouble), and the artificial teeth (Sometimes you are in and sometimes you are out).

Another way to check on our selection of words is by means of the tape recorder. When we use a tape recording it's too late, of course, to do anything about that particular sermon. But we may be able to make corrections in future sermons. And be careful of too quickly saying, "But I can't stand to listen to myself." You may not be the only one who can't stand it!

Almost as important as the selection of the right words is the right delivery of the words. A common fault with delivery is that it is not loud enough. It may be loud enough for many of the listeners, but not loud enough for the person who is hearing-impaired, the person who is sitting behind a fussy baby, or a person who is sitting next to an air conditioner. Except where there has been some physiological damage, speaking too softly is learned. To correct the problem the learned habits must be unlearned and new habits learned. Jay Adams has a helpful section on this in his book.^{xliv}

Perhaps the biggest problem with delivery comes when the speed and pitch of the voice does not match the content of the sermon. This tells the listener that something is *unreal*. He doesn't know why--whether the words are not that important, or the preacher does not believe them himself, or they really don't apply in real life. But when the preacher delivers exciting words with nonchalance or dull words with gusto, the hearer cannot long pay attention—something in him tells him not to.

We could speak much about other matters in delivery—about fixing the eye of people, about avoiding little quirks which little boys in tile back row pick up and make book on, about poise and grooming. Suffice it to say that for many people a fine sermon can be spoiled with a poor delivery.

The goal in the selection of all the words of our sermons will be to communicate the vital message of God's Word to people who come from an infinite variety of backgrounds and interests. There is perhaps no other profession called upon to communicate ideas to such a diverse assembly. It takes hard work to accomplish it. When John Keats first wrote "A Thing of Beauty Is a Joy Forever," the line read, "A thing of beauty is a constant joy." "His roommate told him it was a nice line, but it lacked something. Only after pondering it a long

time did Keats exclaim, "I have it!" and wrote it as it now stands. And if John Keats had to do this by hard labor, there is hope for any of us who must labor to find the right words for our sermons.^{xlv}

Where are you going, Preacher? Do you look forward to stepping into your pulpit? It can be depressing to pour out your soul to a small company of people which doesn't seem to grow or be much affected by what is said. "If a man in those circumstances does not guard with jealous care his periods of daily devotion, his work becomes dull routine. Nothing ever happens, and—worse still—he no longer thinks it will."^{xlvi} It will not do for the preacher to harp on the people's lack of interest in God's Word, nor to insinuate that the Holy Spirit has cheated him out of the gifts that are needed for effective preaching.

Hard work is the solution. As Davis asserts: "The minister must preach out of a busy life, full of hard work. He will not have time to bring every sermon to the perfection of a published poem or short story. But if he lets that fact excuse him for poor work, he is doomed."^{xlvii} But by work we do not mean busy-work. There is the story of Shelley's time schedule: "I study Portuguese while shaving. I translate Spanish for an hour before breakfast. I read all the forenoon and write all the afternoon; every minute of the day is filled with something"; and an old Quaker woman answering him, "Friend, when does thee do thy thinking?"^{xlviii} Thinking is hard work; the preacher shouldn't let his sermons betray a lack of it.

How could it be any different? If preaching is the most vital and pressing work there is, how could it receive from us anything but the very best of the gifts God has bestowed upon us? If preaching is a "high and awful task", then how dare we bring into our pulpits anything that smacks of drivel? If preaching is the response of God's men to the Lord's order: "Go, therefore!" what right do we have to approach our work with anything but the clearest of goals?

Go, Preacher, and preach! Immortal souls are counting on you!

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Endnotes:

ⁱ Buttrick, "Jesus Came Preaching" p. 4

ⁱⁱ Adams, "Pulpit Speech" P. 1

ⁱⁱⁱ Sangster, "The Craft of Sermon Construction" p. 11

^{iv} Buttrick, *op. cit.*, p. 4

^v Luther, "What Luther Says: An Anthology" pp. 1121 and 1126

^{vi} *Ibid*, p. 1132

^{vii} *Ibid*, p. 1132

^{viii} Buttrick, *op. cit.*, p. 9

^{ix} *Ibid*, p. 128

^x *Ibid*, p. 236

^{xi} Sangster, *op. cit.*, p. 26

^{xii} Schaff, "History of the Christian Church" Vol. I p. 461

^{xiii} Sangster, *op. cit.*, p. 12

^{xiv} *Ibid*, p. 12

^{xv} Caemmerer, "Preaching for the Church" p. 16

^{xvi} Buttrick, *op.cit.*, p. 5

^{xvii} Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 12

^{xviii} Davis, "Design for Preaching" p. 55

^{xix} Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 12

^{xx} Buttrick, *op. cit.*, p. 120

^{xxi} Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 63

^{xxii} Sangster, *op. cit.*, p. 55

^{xxiii} *Ibid*, p. 103

^{xxiv} Broadus, quoted in Adams, *op. cit.*, p.83

^{xxv} Davis, *op. cit.*, p.59

^{xxvi} Buttrick, *op. cit.*, p.148

^{xxvii} Davis, *op. cit.*, p.43f

^{xxviii} *Ibid*, p.79

^{xxix} *Ibid*, p.44

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- xxx Adams, *op. cit.*, p.99
xxxI Davis, *op. cit.*, p.22
xxxII Caemmerer, *op. cit.*, p.36ff
xxxIII Sangster, *op. cit.*, p.62
xxxIV Davis, *op. cit.*, p.172
xxxV Sangster, *op. cit.*, p.65
xxxVI Adams, *op. cit.*, p.53
xxxVII Buttrick, *op. cit.*, p.11
xxxVIII Luther, *op. cit.*, p.1118f
xxxIX Adams, *op. cit.*, p.125
x^l Sangster, *op. cit.*, p.18
x^{li} Davis, *op. cit.*, p.268ff *passim*
x^{lii} Adams, *op. cit.*, p.121
x^{liii} Buttrick, *op. cit.*, p.157
x^{liv} Davis, *op. cit.*, p.4f
x^{lv} Adams, *op. cit.*, pp.130-146
x^{lvi} Sangster, *op. cit.*, p.23
x^{lvii} Davis, *op. cit.*, p.12
x^{lviii} Buttrick, *op. cit.*, p.183
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