

The Word Fitly Spoken

By Carl F. Bolle

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Foreword

We are not going to give you any masterful dissertation on preaching or homiletics. We are in no position to do so. What we propose to do is to share with you some simple insights and convictions we have gained during a half-century of preaching. We do so in the hope that they may be of some help to those engaged as I am – in a limited measure still – in the great high adventure of preaching Christ and Him crucified and risen again. Having received permission from those in charge to do so, I have changed the title of this paper to read:

THE WORD FITLY SPOKEN

We have endeavored to confine our thoughts to the topic originally suggested, “Principles and Pulpit Practice of Proper Homiletics,” and to deal with those matters hinted at in the letter I received, namely, “good sermonizing, good delivery, good introduction, appropriate illustration, timely application.”

Carl F. Bolle

The Word Fitly Spoken

“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in baskets of silver” Proverbs 25:11. What a dazzlingly, divinely inspired sentence that is! Instructors of speech, professors of composition and journalism, teachers of homiletics over the years, indeed, over the centuries, have seized upon those exquisitely lustrous words of Solomon to challenge their students to strive for greater excellence, for more majestic power and more compelling beauty of expression in their compositions.

Have you ever stopped to consider what it was that might have inspired the brilliant monarch of Israel to make this observation? I have! And I’ve come up with the following, all of which is purely imaginary to be sure. But who knows – for sure? Well, here it is!

Solomon is in the process of preparing a great state banquet to which the most eminent members of his kingdom as well as neighboring kingdoms have been invited. In working out preliminary details, he calls together a number of his silver and goldsmiths and says to them, “For some time now I’ve been thinking about something special for the head table. Then last night it dawned on me. Why not baskets of silver, delicately woven of strands of silver, interlaced with apple blossoms, and in the baskets, tastefully arranged apples of finest gold?”

“I know that you men possess the skills to do this. What do you say?” Brimming with excitement, they reply: “It can be done, oh king. And we will endeavor to make them truly conversation pieces!” And conversation pieces they were!

Now the banquet is over. As the king reclines upon his bed, too excited to sleep, he reviews various highlights of the evening. He recalls the waves of excitement that kept sweeping through the banquet hall as his guests moved among cascades of floral decorations, listened to instrumental and choral music and then feasted on the delicacies and rarities that had been meticulously prepared for them. Then as he thinks of the excitement that the apples of gold in baskets of silver had evoked, he cannot help smiling. His men certainly achieved what they had set out to do – to make them truly conversation pieces.

Then as the king continues to reflect upon the events of the evening, and recalls the ongoing conversation among the guests, much of it absolutely scintillating, he comes to realize once again that, after all, there is really nothing more beautiful, nothing more stimulating and nothing more exciting than good words and good conversation.

Then taking the pad and stylus over on his desk at his bedside, he writes, “A word fitly spoken is.... Then, pausing for a brief moment only, he adds – “is like apples of gold in baskets of silver.”

Now then, if it is true, as it certainly is, that a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in baskets of silver, then it becomes infinitely more true when we substitute for *a word* – *The Word*, namely, *The Word of God*. It is *this* Word, or more precisely, the proclamation or preaching of *this* Word in a most fitting manner that is to engage our attention in this paper.

Criticism Heard

I am sure that most of you are well aware that preaching today is pretty low on the totem pole. If not, then just listen for a moment to what people are saying:

Jim Murray, well-known sportswriter for the *Los Angeles Herald*, last fall wrote an article in which he expatiated on the degeneration of pro football. The article carried this headline: “Super Bowl as Predictable as Snow in Alaska; As Monotonous As a Sermon.” One of the questions asked on a recent TV *Family Feud* program was this: “Where is the clock watched most often?” The answer which received almost top ranking on the chart was, “Church!” As I turned to my dictionary to see what it had to say about a homily, I came upon this: a) It is a discourse or sermon, b) It is a tedious exhortation on some moral point.

Reid in his provocative book, *The Empty Pulpit*, places the blame for declining church attendance upon those in the pulpit rather than upon those in the pew. He lists the following criticisms:

- 1) Preachers tend to use complex, archaic language, which the average person does not understand.
- 2) Most sermons are boring, dull, uninteresting and monotonous.
- 3) Most preaching is irrelevant
- 4) Preaching today is not enthusiastic preaching.
- 5) Preaching does not communicate
- 6) Preaching has been over-emphasized.
- 7) People are tired of preaching.

This is but a sampling of what is being said about preaching in our day. Let us make no mistake about it, much of what is being said is true. But it is not true of all preaching. And it certainly is not true of all of our preaching.

Lloyd Perry, in an article which recently appeared in *Christianity Today*, declared, “It is not true that people are tired of preaching. What they are tired of is non-preaching, dull preaching, boring preaching.”

Being Aware

Now there is not one of us who has not occasionally delivered a pretty dull, lousy, monotonous sermon. There were times, I am sure, when we were aware that our words were not as fitly spoken as they might have been or could have been, In any case, they were hardly of the quality of apples of gold in baskets of silver. There is nothing too serious about that really. It would become serious only if one were not aware of it and if one were to continue to ladle out mediocre fare.

Whether one is aware of it or not, there is not one of us who has as yet fully arrived, not one, I daresay, who has as yet preached his best sermon. Whether a preacher ever achieves a sermon of the quality of apples of gold in baskets of silver is rather immaterial, so long as he strives constantly to bring to his people through his

sermons the best offerings of God-given wisdom, talents and abilities of which he is capable. What we are saying then, is that the directive of our Lord to feed His sheep and His lambs, to proclaim the Gospel, rightly to divide the Word of Truth is a tremendous task. However, thank God, it is not an impossible one. The Lord never gives His servants a work to do without at the same time also giving them the help they need. The words of our Lord addressed to Peter long ago are as pertinent today as they were in his day, namely, “Follow Me (preacher) and I will make you a fisher of men.” Nor should one ever forget the words of Paul which every preacher ought to apply to himself: “I can do all things through Christ, which strengthenth me.” And when a preacher does the Lord’s work undergirded by His power and wisdom, there is no work, rather no task (for task it is) more satisfying, more exhilarating, more spiritually productive than the task of preaching the gospel.

Prepare For Preaching

And now to the task of preaching – of preparing the fitting word for our preaching – and to our topic – *the Word fitly spoken*. Let us consider, first, the task of preparing the fitting word to be spoken and then the task of fittingly speaking the prepared Word. Notice that before the Word can fitly be spoken, it needs to be fitly prepared for speaking, teaching or preaching.

At the outset let us thank the Lord that we of the Lutheran Church are not confronted with problems that are burdens for preachers of Reformed Churches, who are left pretty much to themselves to find some fitting word or text to preach about Sunday after Sunday.

What with a wonderful pericope system at our disposal, we are spared this tedious task. At the same time, following the suggested lessons of the liturgical calendar, we are disciplined to provide a well-balanced diet for our people as well as for ourselves. I believe it is fair to say, as Donald E. Demaray does, “that where the responsibility of selecting sermon texts is left to ministers themselves, there large chunks of Christian truth are going to remain foreign to their people.”

Hint #1

And now let us address ourselves to the preparation of the sermon for preaching. Let us say that you have selected your text. Now what? As a first step, the text needs to be prayed over. One can do no better there than simply to seize upon the words of Samuel and to pray: “Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth.” Another prayer which is often used is this: “Lord, open Thou mine eyes to see and mine ears to hear marvelous things coming from Thy Word!” Then, continuing in prayer, study and wrestle with the text and see what you can get out of it. Then and not until then, turn to the original compare modern translations, draw upon resource materials, such as lexicons, commentaries, and sermons of others as well. Then pray for further guidance, illumination and wisdom as you ponder what it has to say to the particular needs of your people (as well as your own) living as they do in this modern age of 1979. So it is “*ora et labora*.” Pray and work! Work and pray! Or as Luther put it: “*Die Predigt muss erbeten sein!*”

To work without prayer is practical atheism. To pray without work is presumption. Prayer should be the inspiration for work. When a pastor prays works he will invariably become excited at what happens. Under such circumstances it is not likely that he will produce many dull sermons.

Hint #2

Begin in plenty of time! A great number of eminent preachers, as I learned from their writings, begin their sermons on Tuesdays and have their manuscripts ready by Friday. This enables them to spend their Saturdays shaping and reshaping, honing and refining their messages, and so to saturate themselves with their material that they are practically ready to burst into flame as they enter their pulpits.

And now how is it with us? I would guess that there are some who do not begin working at their sermons until Friday or even Saturday. To be sure, there are those who are able to dash off sermons in breathless haste, beginning as late as Saturday night, whose offerings can be blessed and have been blessed by the Holy Spirit. However, what invariably happens to those who wait so long before they get going is that their best thoughts come to them on the following Monday or Tuesday.

Not only so, too often those who at the last minute hurriedly snatch a text for their Vesper, so that they may have something to talk about, are the ones who next morning, talk about 35 to 45 minutes. Unfortunately, that is often the very morning when new families who recently moved into the community attend services for the first time – and probably the last.

To be sure, there are times when because of unforeseen interruptions, pastors are compelled to flit into the pulpit on a wing and a prayer, nor have they fared too badly. In fact, I've heard of pastors who, completely bereft of time, simply selected a homily from a published book of sermons in their library and read it to their parishioners. The only problem here is that the parishioners may urge their pastors to do this more often.

I don't suppose that the following ever happened to us. And I imagine that there is little danger that it ever would. And yet, Dr. McLennon tells of a young vicar in a certain English parish who was so inept and so lazy that his chief urged him to read a sermon by some eminent divine rather than continue inflicting his own poor composition on his parishioners. All of which he did. So come Sunday morning, the young man entered the pulpit. Then, having greeted the parishioners as his dear friends, he opened his book, turned a few pages, and began to read: "Twenty-five years ago when I was bishop of Manchester..."

Even the selection of a published sermon, in the light of what could happen, takes time. But the writing of one's own sermons in preparation for the pulpit takes a lot of time – as well as inspiration, illumination, perspiration. So, take time!

Having completed the outline of your sermon under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, you are now on the way to gathering truths of tremendous importance to share with your people, as well as with the visitors who will be attending your service.

Having something to share and to say, is one thing, but how to say it, -- how to arrange the thoughts progressively – that is something else again. It is here that the homiletician stands ready to help.

It is rather interesting to note that we have no record that the disciples ever asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us how to teach!" or "Lord, teach us how to preach!" But we do know that they came to Him one day with the request, "Lord, teach us how to pray!" They had heard and overheard their Master as He prayed to His Heavenly Father. They had observed the power of prayer in His life and in His activities. Thus they undoubtedly felt that once they had mastered the technique of prayer, everything else, including preaching, would take care of itself.

But let us not suppose that the disciples did not also learn a great deal about preaching from their Lord. They could not have failed to notice how He employed argument, explanation, logic and illustration in His presentations. Nor could they have helped observing the fitness and vividness of His vocabulary. What undoubtedly made the greatest impression upon them, as it did to so many others, was the loftiness of His message and the authority as well as the sincerity with which He presented it, a manner utterly unlike that of those who had assumed the religious leadership over the people and whose preachments were little more than cold comments based on the minute legal details of Scripture. Thus we may conclude that the disciples absorbed a great deal about preaching from their Lord and Savior.

Hint #3

But while this is being said, it needs also to be pointed out that our Lord has laid down no specific rules governing the craft, or the art, of preaching (homiletics). All of which simply means that He has permitted us to dig in a field which has no fences.

Thus, in his endeavor to become ever more proficient in his preaching, the preacher should give ear to the multitude of voices which today are clamoring for his attention. Together with his reading of articles and books on homiletics and studying the sermons of others, he should not neglect opportunities to hear those who are recognized pulpit masters and to see how they put their sermons together. A word of caution needs to be sounded here. Before adopting any new techniques for his sermonizing, a preacher needs carefully to consider whether they will suit his personality or not. A preacher should endeavor to develop his own sermon style. He should be his own man, speaking God's thoughts in his own way, not becoming a carbon copy of another.

The Introduction

Now let us address ourselves to the composition or structure of the sermon. Beginning at the beginning, that brings us face to face with the introduction. We have just a few hints to offer here. Not that the introduction is not important; it is tremendously important. If it be true, as many affirm it is, that within the first moments you either have the attention of your congregation or you don't, then the introduction requires most careful study.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if the situation on a Sunday morning would be like this: A man is reading from a manuscript. A group of people are gathered around him and they are listening intently. Not only are they sitting on the edge of their chairs, they are almost afraid to breathe for fear that they may miss something he is reading to them. Even though the man stumbles over various words and mispronounces others, it seems to make no difference to them.

Why not? The man is a lawyer. He is reading a will and they all expect to get something out of it. To be sure some will come to listen to your sermons in such eager fashion, not unlike the manner of the Bereans as they listened to Paul. However, you may be quite certain that in almost any congregation today, some have an attitude similar to that of the Athenians toward Paul. They muttered: "What will this babbler say?" Such being the case, the first few moments of your sermon are tremendously important. So, pray and work to make those opening sentences capture the attention of your hearers, and then, don't let them go.

The Introduction Which Precedes the Sermon Introduction

Every pastor should be aware that there is an introduction which precedes the sermon introduction. This includes music, the selection of hymns, the reading of prayers and lessons, in short, everything with which the pastor is, or at least should be, involved.

At this point, let me read to you the gripes of a certain retired British divine who is sitting in his pew preparing himself for worship – on the basis of Hebrews 12:1,2: "Let us lay aside every weight – looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith." (This is from David Head's *Countdown*) "Lord," he prays, "I'm an old man now, and I ought to be able to deal with things that annoy me. But I don't! As I get ready in my seat for this morning's service, let me face the worst that can happen. Then perhaps it won't be quite so grim. I am already being badly put off, or expect to be badly put off, by hymns I don't know; a read essay that leaves me cold; sweet, sentimental organ music that makes me hot; lessons that I can't understand."

Then he goes on, "I hope to goodness the lessons will be intelligible today. Either the preacher plunges into some obscure passage we ought to know more about, or else he spends far too long telling us what we are going to hear read in a minute. If they used the lessons suggested or gave us a warning of what they had chosen, it would help. Somehow more should be made of the reading of lessons."

He continues: "I suppose I ought to be glad that the congregation is getting to know new hymns. The words of new hymns have spoken a direct and fresh word to me occasionally. But four new hymns in one service is over doing it – as last Sunday. One takes some swallowing!"

What this man is saying needs to be said. Certainly great care should be exercised in the selection of hymns. One new hymn, especially if it is a strange chorale, takes some swallowing. And if a pastor should

select such a hymn for his pulpit hymn, he had better have some startling introduction ready to jar his people awake again. Hymns should be chosen to exhilarate a congregation, not to exhaust it!

And certainly something needs to be said about the reading of lessons and of prayers. Joseph O'Connor in his little book on preaching affirms that it is hard to convince an educated man that he does not know how to read aloud. "Many preachers," he maintains, "while they do not blunder in pronunciation, or disregard commas, nevertheless read badly."

There is nothing quite so refreshing as to hear the lessons and prayers for the day read smoothly and with sincerity. Those who excel in this area will tell you that they spend considerable time reading and rereading the lessons aloud, virtually memorizing them, and that they give great heed to such details as inflection, accent, pauses, etc.

O'Connor declares that none but a thoughtless man will attempt to read the Scriptures, or indeed any devotion, aloud in church until he had made some preparation, or given frequent thought and practice to the laws of vocal delivery."

"The impressive reading of the Gospel!" he says, "bespeaks attention to your sermon. Indeed, nothing awakens deeper attention than the proper reading of the Word of God."

So then, let us not disregard the introduction which precedes the introduction to the sermon. "The word fitly spoken here is like apples of gold in baskets of silver."

The Introduction to the Sermon

And now for a few hints regarding the introduction to the sermon:

Hint #1. Be brief! The introduction should only be long enough to introduce the subject and no longer. The content should be designed to whet the appetite and no more. An old woman said of Welsh preacher, John Owen, that he was so long spreading the table that she lost her appetite for the meal. Let the introduction be what the antipasto salad is to an Italian dinner.

Hint #2. Take time! Peterson Smith, British trainer of preachers, had it right when he said: "You can make them listen if you pay the price." Introductions need to be mulled over, framed and reframed. There are those who feel that the introduction should not be written until the sermon has been completed. This is their way of saying: "Take time!"

Hint #3. Use a variety of approaches. "Never do the same thing always," is the word of homileticians. Illustrations, life-situations, striking statements, or quotations, any of these can be helpful in alerting people to the sermon.

A warning which needs to be sounded here is, "Let everything be done decently and in order." The preacher must be careful not to offend, shock, or go beyond that which is in good taste. This applies to the entire sermon. If the introduction contains something of bad taste, it will contaminate the entire sermon. One should also be extremely careful of one's choice of sermon titles.

Hint #4. Here we simply quote the words of Cicero, who said that in the introduction the speaker should arouse interest, secure favor and prepare to lead.

The Sermon

Now for the sermon proper! Seated at your desk, with your Bibles, commentaries, lexicon and Roget's Thesaurus spread out before you, with the Holy Spirit at your elbow, and an imaginary parishioner or group of parishioners on the other side of your desk, address your words to those persons as you write. And as for writing out your sermon, never stop doing so! Frank Gaebel in the current issue of *Christianity Today*, addressing himself to the question, "What counsel would you offer to young people who want to follow a career in Christian writing?" (which, of course, would include writing of sermons), had this to say: "Three things!

Read widely and well. Write and keep on writing. Above all, rewrite and rewrite and rewrite. In short, keep on writing and learn how to edit yourself.”

“This discipline,” he affirms, “is bound to help your preaching style, make you careful in your choice of words and assist you in developing the gift of communication so necessary for your preaching ministry.” “Though I speak with the tongue of angels and have not clarity, it profits nothing.”

And now some hints for your sermon:

Hint #1. There must be structure. While there are varieties of structure to be utilized (whether the sermon should be expository, topical, or textual) there must be structure.

Hint #2. There must be order. An ancient proverb declares that “Order is heaven’s first law.” Paul’s directive also applies here, “Let all things be done decently and in order.”

Hint #3. A sermon must move. It should move logically from point to point. Demosthenes made this comment: “Persuasion is as dependent upon the order of the arguments as upon the arguments themselves.” Demaray says: “Placement of material with a view to audience palpability is high in the homiletical priority list.” The sermon should also move forward in climactic order.

Hint #4. There must be unity. As an illustration here one might consider a tree with its trunk its branches and leaves. It has cider. There is variety as well as unity. The trunk is the mainstream of thought, the branches, its points, and the leaves, its illustrations and quotations.

Hint #5. Avoid using too many points. Three, or at the most four, is the suggestion of men like MacLaren and others. Augustine argued for three as the perfect number. Too many points can distract the hearers and wear them out.

The Dialogical Sermon

There is no need, nor is there time now, to review the various types of sermon styles usually employed by pastors, except to say that of the three best known – topical, textual, expository – the last seems to be the most satisfying and nourishing.

Today there is a type of sermon which all of us would do well to consider and to use. We refer to the dialogical sermon. People love dialog. How else do we account for the popularity of the Phil Donahue Show, except for the opportunity it provides people to engage in or to listen in on debate as issues of all kinds are presented. Or how do we account for the prestige of Ann Landers and her newspaper column? Questions, attitudes, concerns, problems are stated and argued, and Miss Landers gives her answers. The cleverness as well as the astuteness of her answers has much to do with wide readership.

A complaint about preaching being heard today is that it is but a one-way communication in which the preacher receives a minimum of feedback. His listeners cannot question him, raise doubts or express themselves. Thus their role as church-members is a merely passive one. Preaching, it is argued, is an incomplete learning process unless it is supplemented with dialog.

To be sure, there is considerable truth in what is being said. But to involve the congregation in dialog takes careful study. There are churches in which pastors step out of the pulpit and down into the center aisle. It is from here that they field questions and engage their members in dialog. What usually happens is that only a few people take over and do all the talking, much to the annoyance of others. It has also been found that since the custom of having the preacher in the pulpit address his people in the pews is deeply entrenched in the average parish, any departure here can prove disturbing and even distressing.

How does one solve the problem? Actually there is no need for a preacher to engage another or others in dialog. He can combine everything within himself. In order to do this effectively, however, he must know his people. To know his people he will have to spend much time with them, visiting them in their homes, sitting where they sit. He must be able to listen and to hear what they are actually saying. He must be aware of their hurts, their frustrations, their doubts, and their problems. Then, in sermon, in dialog, starting where they are, guiding them by various logical steps, asking their questions, voicing their reactions, not dodging their

problems, or glossing over difficulties or giving glib answers, he must endeavor graciously to move them forward into God's truth. This working together, this reasoning together, this intellectual combat of preacher within himself and in imagination with others, this concern for what is being said and then bringing his people face to face with what God says, is exceedingly stimulating dialog, yes, exciting dialog for both pastor and people.

One of the greatest exponents of this type of preaching is Helmut Thielicke of Hamburg, Germany. We've read about everything he has written. We've also had the opportunity to hear him. There is much that one can learn from this pulpit giant, May we suggest that you not fail to read-his *Our Heavenly Father*, *The Waiting Father* and *Encounter With Spurgeon*.

Illustrations

The letter inviting me to do this paper included the note: "Be sure to say something about appropriate illustrations." I am glad that this was said, for I feel that we have made far too little use of the illustration in our circles.

We are living in a picture-world today. Practically all advertising via newspapers, magazines, and television is done by way of pictures. An Arab proverb reads: "He is the best speaker who can turn the ear into an eye." Notice how Solomon calls both ear and eye into play when he says: "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in baskets of silver."

Let us never forget that the greatest of all preachers of all time, our Lord Jesus Christ, was a picture preacher. And all of the great preachers of the Old and New Testament alike (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Zechariah, Peter, John, Paul) made extensive use of parables, illustrations and picture language.

We should do the same! And what a wealth of illustrative treasure is available to us within the Bible itself! What a roster of heroes and heroines of faith are presented to us in the Old Testament! And what exciting stories it presents to illuminate our presentations. The very best illustrations are Bible illustrations. Incidentally, nothing so lights up the New Testament like the Old. If a pastor is at a loss where and how to find appropriate illustrations, let him simply turn to his Nesper and he will come upon abundant material to illustrate his sermons.

Then, if a preacher will keep his eyes and ears open to exciting things which are constantly happening around him, he will never be without fresh material to illuminate his sermons, which after all, is what illustration is all about. The word illustration comes from the Latin *illustrare*, which means "to light up." There is nothing that will so light up a sermon as vivid and varied and appropriate pictures.

Illustration Hints

Hint #1. As just mentioned, **illustrations should be used to clarify.** The goal of illustration is revelation, and revelation is impossible without clarification.

Hint #2. Space your illustrations. Illustrations skillfully spaced have psychological value, for they provide listener relief. There are those who say that people listen intently for six or seven minutes. These are good spots at which to inject illustrations. People need breathing spots. If they are not provided people become weary.

Hint #3. Be careful about drawing too much attention to yourself or to your family. Instead of saying, "This happened to me," or "When we attended this Seminar together," or "on one occasion when I was speaking to a great crowd," it is far better to say something like this: "A certain pastor I know had this experience." Even that isn't too subtle. One can do better.

Hint #4. Be honest. Don't tell of experiences that happened to others as though they happened to you. This could prove embarrassing. And don't embellish a story, telling what you wish might have occurred, when actually it didn't.

Hint #5. Avoid introductions to launch illustrations. Shy away from saying something like this: “The other day I heard a story which I believe would illustrate the point I wish to make, and which I would like to pass on to you. You may judge for yourself whether or not it does indeed illustrate what I want to say.” For goodness sake, why not just say it!

Hint #6. Don’t stop to explain the illustration. If it is so nebulous that it needs explanation, then don’t use it. Of all the parables spoken by our Lord, He explained only two, that of the Sower and the Seed and the Wheat and Tares. And this He did only at the request of His disciples, who asked what it meant.

Hint #7. Don’t overdo the illustrations. Use them sparingly. Save the best for the end. If an illustration can be found which will forcefully and succinctly wrap up the highpoint of the sermon, here is the very best spot for it. Tell it and then stop! To keep on adding explanations and applications and illustrations at this point, can be irritating. Something should be left to the imagination of the hearers. What with many parishioners today having academic degrees and possessing sheepskins, they do not appreciate being treated like sheep.

Humor

How about a bit of humor in one’s sermons? Done in good taste and well timed, a light and humorous story is like a breath of fresh air. Luther used it extensively. He loved to quote from Aesop’s Fables. Spurgeon often had his people roaring with laughter, as did Macartney, Chappell and a host of others. Clovis Chappell, certainly a classic American preacher, knew just when to tell an amusing story. He also knew when to pick up the ball and go on. A good laugh can also give glory to God, A good humorous story, fittingly told is like apples of gold in baskets of silver.

Thielicke in his *Encounter With Spurgeon* has this to say: “Should we not.” Spurgeon would probably ask in the face of the deadly seriousness with which the business of the church is pursued today, “Should we not see that the lines of laughter about the eyes are just as much marks of faith as are the lines of care and seriousness? Is it only earnestness that is baptized? Is laughter pagan? We have already allowed too much that is good to be lost to the church. A church is in a bad way when it bans her laughter from the sanctuary and leaves it to the cabaret, the nightclub and the toastmasters.” However, humor is not for everyone.

And Now To the Conclusion!

It has been said that half of art is to know when to stop. I don’t believe that we would be overstating the case if we were to say that half of all preachers have yet to learn that art. Phillips Brooks, however, disagrees. He maintains that all preachers have the same tendency – to drag out their conclusions.

One wonders why they do it? No doubt there are some who so enjoy the euphoria of having their audience in their grasp that they hate to let go. Others may feel that their message still needs further clarification; thus they now engage in doing what they should have been doing (in committee with themselves and God) in their study. Of course, they stop eventually – long after they are finished.

There are those who maintain that the conclusion demands a preacher’s greatest skill. I would agree! As he works at his conclusion it would be well for the preacher to envision his people now asking questions such as these.

“Well, what am I to do about this?” “Why did you share this with me?” “How does all this relate to me in the here and now?” “What specific attitude of action ought I to develop from this, and how can I achieve it?” The conclusion should address itself to questions such as these and then focus upon answers drawn from Scriptures. Let these be assuredly, radiantly, challengingly, and briefly stated, leaving the rest to the Holy Spirit.

The Priority of Preaching

Up to this point our concern has had to do with the task of preparing the fitting word (the sermon) for preaching. Now let us consider the task of preaching the prepared fitting Word.

In my Seminary days it was rather assumed that if a preacher were filled with his subject, preaching would sort of take care of itself. That supposition, no doubt, rested upon the Scripture, “Out of the fulness of the heart, the mouth speaketh.”

To be sure, a smattering of attention was given to the subject of homiletics. Our professor in his discipline was the venerable William Henkel. Stimulating as he was in the classroom, and resourceful as he was in developing interesting sermon outlines, in the pulpit he left much to be desired. Not that his sermons did not provide the Bread of Life. They did. And many were nourished by the quality of his pulpit fare. But his homilies were given in such a monotonous, droning manner, that it took all of one’s energies to concentrate on what he was saying.

So then, just because a pastor happens to be a Bible student, a Greek and Hebrew scholar, and filled with his subject, it does not necessarily mean that he is going to be a present-day Paul or Apollos in the pulpit. Preaching is an art which needs to be learned. It takes practice, practice, practice.

In addressing ourselves to the work of the ministry, it is imperative that we do not forget our priorities. To be sure, the ministry is a many-sided career, but first of all and most of all, the preacher is called to proclaim and preach the Gospel.

Approximately fifty years ago the eminent London preacher, Gypsy Smith, favorite of the king, of Parliament, and of commoners as well, came to St. Paul to lecture and to preach. Among the stories he told there was this gem. He had gone to Leeds to attend a ministerial convention. In the process of checking in at the hotel where he was to stay, he glanced over the list of those who had already signed in. As he did so, he could not help noticing how practically every one called attention to his titles and degrees.

There was Ph.Ds, LL.Ds, DDs. Smith was well aware that there were very few effective preachers among them. Then taking the pen offered him by the desk clerk, he too signed in. “Gypsy Smith,” he wrote, “poor sinner saved by the grace of God, called by the grace of God to preach the grace of God to poor sinners.” And what a magnificent preacher of God’s grace he was. Preaching was his magnificent obsession.

That is precisely what our obsession should be also, Regardless how varied our interests may be and how many talents we may possess, our primary concern should be preaching.

As concerned preachers it ought to be our constant endeavor to seek to improve our preaching skills. And, what with the advance of information in every phase of communication today, the opportunity for improvement is endless. In listing things about which preachers should be concerned in preparation for the pulpit we would enumerate the following:

Voice Projection

If faith comes by hearing then a preacher should make every effort to be heard. The first secret of projection is to speak to the person in the back row. If he hears, then others should have no problem. However, living as we do in this microphonic age, there is no reason for a preacher not to be heard, even in the largest churches, even if he uses the conversational style, which after all is the most pleasant for the hearers. People do not like to be yelled at. They resist being clobbered.

Pitch and Tone

Every preacher should cultivate a good speaking voice. There is no reason for a preacher's voice to sound like the open A string of a violin. The voice properly placed to the front of the mouth and supported from the diaphragm, not from the throat, is bound to be pleasing. Nor should preachers seek to cultivate a special pulpit tone. There are any number of pastors who are a joy to listen to when they are engaged in conversation, or when they speak off the cuff at conferences, but who become entirely different people once they get into the pulpit. An unnatural tone, that stained glass, theatrical tone that some preachers adopt is bound to be annoying. People do not long put up with a put-on.

Avoid Monotone

There is nothing which will send people off to slumberland quite so quickly as the lackluster droning of Charlie One Note. Variety of pitch and pleasantness of tone need to be cultivated by every preacher.

Enunciation, pronunciation and diction are also key factors in communication. The art of making oneself understood depends not only on volume, pitch, tone, but on the formation of sounds as well. One must, however, be careful here. Overniceness can turn people off, as can any form of ostentation.

Radio and TV broadcasters are reminded to keep practicing words such as again (not agin), any (not inny), came (not kim), get (not git), ten (not tin), had to (not hadda), tune (not toon), assume (not assoom), new (not noo). They are also urged not to use anxious for eager, not to say, "the reason why is because," when all that is needed is to say, "the reason is that."

Preachers need to be reminded to avoid words not generally known. When Phil Donahue asked Pete Rose how it was possible for him, what with all the publicity he was receiving to get along so amicably with his fellow-players, Pete paused for a moment. Then he said: "I can't answer that! I don't know what 'amicably' means." There are plenty of words in our theological vocabulary which need to be explained today, words such as grace, justification, sanctification, sin, unionism.

And, of course, preachers must be on guard against the misuse of words. There is no word like covetiousness. And the word is mischievous, not mischievious.

Malapropisms are to be avoided at all costs. They are much more likely to be heard from parishioners than preachers, as the following humorous story indicates. A woman, who because of her outgoing nature, was invited to serve as a greeter at her church. On the very first Sunday in her new role, the head usher introduced her to a visitor and asked her to assist the gentleman with the order of service, all of which she endeavored to do. Having helped him through the opening portion of the service, she remarked, "I hope that you can get to like our Lutheran lethargy!" Then after the choir had sung an anthem, accompanied by the organ, she turned to her neighbor and remarked, "I really prefer to have the choir sing acapulco!" Noticing that her charge seemed to have difficulty hearing, she said, "Perhaps it would be better for you after this to sit farther up front where the agnostics are better." At the close of the service, after having introduced the man to the minister, she said: "Oh pastor that was a wonderful sermon! It was simply superfluous!" With tongue in cheek the pastor replied: "Perhaps some of my sermons ought to be published – posthumously of course!" "That would be wonderful!" she exclaimed, "the sooner the better!"

Perhaps the best way to improve one's preaching is to listen to others, especially to those in the field of broadcasting. I was about to suggest listening to eminent preachers on the American scene. I do not believe that preachers on the whole are particularly inclined to do this. Some time ago I heard a pastor remark: "The average preacher will travel a thousand miles so that others may have the privilege of hearing him preach. But he will not go across the street to listen to the preaching of another."

All of us can learn from others how to improve our techniques in pulpit communication – in the preaching of the fitting word. Eugene Kennedy in his book, *The Joy of Being Human*, has this to say: "The theologian who serves us best is the one who works patiently to find the right words for our Christian experience at this time in history. He illumines our way of speaking fresh words to us, enabling us to better

understand our Christian identity and faith. Theologians must translate for us the living words that nourish and shape us, not parse long-dead verbs.”

There is yet another language to be cultivated by the preacher and that is body language, technically known as kinesics. We used to refer to it as gesturing. That term has become rather passé since we have come to recognize that not merely hands, but the entire body, indeed the entire person, is to be involved in the communicative process.

When the preacher feels at home with his people and at ease with them this is bound to affect his pulpit manner. He will come through to them with warmth. His love and deep concern for them and the exciting message he has prepared for them will speak through his fingers, his hands, arms, head, eyes, facial expression. In fact, his entire torso will become involved, all of which will serve tremendously in getting his message across.

In The Pulpit

And now you have entered your pulpit. You have prayed and worked hard at your sermon. Great care has been exercised in observing rules of style and of communication. Just one more question. Have you given necessary thought to your overall appearance? Here one should consider such things as hair style, sideburns, beards, shirts, ties and shoes. Is each in good taste? A woman once remarked: “That the tie the preacher wore this morning screamed so loud that I didn’t hear what he said!”

Preachers also need to be on guard lest they acquire habits which are disturbing. Awkward gestures, pet words and phrases repeated too often can be particularly annoying. It is here that wives can be especially helpful to their mates.

Let us remember always that we are ambassadors of the King of kings and Lord of lords. All of this should be reflected in our appearance, our dress, our manners and our speech.

The Delivery of the Sermon

Now we come to the delivery of the sermon – seeing to it that the Word is fitly spoken. One can perhaps do no better here than to ponder the words of Jefferson (not Thomas) who wrote: “Remember that the congregation is nothing but a man. It is not a colossus to be attacked by rhetorical bludgeon, or a baby to be tricked and trapped by rhetorical stratagems and devices. To speak to a man, you must be one yourself. Never endeavor to be eloquent. It may be that God will let you be eloquent a half dozen times in your life, but I am sure that you cannot be eloquent if you try to be. And never declaim! Declamation makes a noise and interests children, but grown-up people care nothing for it. It sounds insincere. Scatter God’s truths through your congregation and rest assured that someone will carry one of them home.” As our Lord Himself declares, “The Word preached shall not return unto Me void.”

Preach With Sincerity

There is one sentence of Jefferson which needs to be especially considered by all of us. It is this: “To be a man you must be a man yourself.” In other words, he is saying that there is no place for phoniness in the ministry. Helmuth Thielicke maintains that one of the greatest reasons for declining church attendance today is a lack of credibility in preachers.

Since people have been let down repeatedly by those in places of highest authority (as in Watergate), they have become extremely wary of those in places of eminence. This includes preachers.

Thielicke affirms that it does not take a congregation long to detect lack of integrity or phoniness. If a pastor denounces materialism, secularism, covetousness, worry, gossip and then consistently displays any or all of these defects in his own life, it will soon become obvious to a congregation. If he talks about heroic faith and

then overreacts to problems that may arise, his people sense it. The extremes of disgust, surprise or disappointment work adversely against a preacher. It is Thielicke's firm conviction that what a man really is – what his chief concern really is – whether it be himself, or philosophy, or theatre, or sports, or whatever, or whether it be teaching and preaching the Word of God sincerely and lovingly to His beloved people, it will ring through in his preaching. Phillips Brooks said: "First among the elements of power which makes for success in preaching, I must put the supreme importance of character, or personal uprightness, and purity impressing themselves upon the men who witness them." St. Francis made the same point when he said: "No use to go anywhere to preach unless we preach while we go."

Preach With Boldness and Gentleness

Preach with boldness and gentleness. Notice that the Word fitly spoken, has nothing to do with speaking the Word in a fit – a fit of temper. A preacher should not scold. He should not rant. After the guest pastor had completed his sermon at a recent Reformation Rally, a child turned to his parents and asked: "What's he mad about?" We read of Stephen that he was a full man – full of the Holy Ghost, and, as a result, full of grace, full of wisdom, full of faith, full of power – not powder, not explosive, not volatile. As he spoke at last to the Sanhedrin, he did so with great fervency, but I am sure he did not rave and rant. And oh what solicitude in those very last words of his: "Father, lay not this sin to their charge!"

An old couple received a telegram from their son, who was away at college. Not having gone to school themselves, they could not read it. So they took it to the butcher. Now the butcher, a gruff sort of individual, glanced at the telegram and read it so: "Dear folks: Am almost starved, please send some money. John." The father snatched the telegram from the butcher, stomped out of the shop and said: "That young scamp won't get a cent!" As the two of them walked homeward together the wife spoke up and said, "Maybe the butcher didn't read it correctly. Let's take it to the baker and have him read it also." So, to the baker they went. This friendly, gracious man took the telegram and read it so: "Dear folks, am almost starved. Please send some money! John." "Why, of course!" said the father, "We'll send him all the money he needs!"

In the game of life hearts are trump, not clubs. Boldness and sincerity must characterize the preacher in his presentation of the Gospel, as well as gentleness.

Preach With Enthusiasm

The word enthusiasm is a simple transliteration from "*enthus*," which is a contracted form of "*en theos*" "having God in oneself" or "inspired." Etymologically then, enthusiasm is divine inspiration. This enthusiasm is the Holy Spirit's to give. And it is given in response to prayer in measure according to His will, His wisdom, His grace and His power. When a preacher, by the grace of God, conscious of his own unworthiness, thrilled by the forgiveness of his sins, excited by a growing understanding of the Scriptures, recognized the wonderful privilege which is his – that of having been called to proclaim the great Good News of Jesus Christ and Him crucified and risen again, he will be overwhelmed with gratitude. When he comes to experience more and more the mighty power of the Word in his own life and beholds how dynamically it has operated in the lives of many others as well he cannot but be thrilled. And when he hears people giving testimony to their rich experiences in words not unlike those of the Psalmist: "He (the Lord through His Mighty Word) brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock" and "He hath also established my goings, and hath put a new song in my mouth," then he will undoubtedly redouble his efforts to proclaim the fitting word in as fitting a manner as possible.

Well, we have spouted ideas, given suggestions, sought fitting words to speak to you, so that you may be encouraged to continue to strive to speak fitting words in a fitting manner to your congregation. However, the most fitting words I can give you for your ministry – words veritably like apples of gold in baskets of silver – are those of Luther's Sanctuary Prayer.

Lord God, Thou hast made me a pastor and teacher in the Church. Thou seest how unfit I am to administer rightly this great and responsible office; and had I been without Thy aid and counsel I would surely have ruined it all long ago. Therefore do I invoke Thee! How gladly do I desire to yield and consecrate my heart and mouth to this ministry. I desire to teach the congregation. I, too, desire ever to learn and to keep Thy Word my constant companion and to meditate thereupon earnestly. Use me as Thy instrument in Thy service. Only do not Thou forsake me, for if I am left to myself, I will certainly bring it all to destruction. Amen.

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