

Plain Talk in the Pulpit

NEIL GREGOR SMITH

ONE of the bottlenecks in the communication of the Christian message is the lack of plain talk in the pulpit. By the time a student enters a theological seminary he has acquired the rudiments of a literary style. Most of his efforts at self-expression have been directed towards the cultivation of such a style. Before he is admitted to the seminary he has had to write essays and examinations in which he employed a literary style to demonstrate his knowledge to, or conceal his ignorance from, his instructors. His style may leave much to be desired, but such as it is his style is a literary one.

When he begins to preach he is strongly inclined to carry over his literary style to the pulpit. His first sermons—and sometimes all his sermons—are pious and theological essays delivered orally. The warnings he receives from his instructors or from his text books on homiletics about the difference between an oral and a literary style often go unheeded, with the result that he continues to speak in the pulpit as he writes in his study.

The tragedy of this situation is that the best students are likely to be handicapped most by the transfer of their literary style to the pulpit. Those who can “get by” in the pulpit with little study and preparation, those who have the unholy combination of “ignorance, indolence and impudence” which permits them to speak extemporaneously in the pulpit are very often able to communicate more effectively than their studious brethren who have expended care and thought on the preparation of their messages, and then deliver them in a style and language that are remote from the language of the people.

I

This situation has existed in the church for a long time. In 1670 John Eachard complained bitterly about the unintelligible, unnatural, and uncommunicative speech of the pulpit. In his tract, *The Ground and Occasions of the Contempt of the Clergy Enquired Into*, he attributed many of the faults of contemporary preaching to the unnatural style developed in the universities. Here young men acquired a taste for “hard words and lofty notions.”

And the misery of it is that this pernicious accustomed way of expression does not only, oftentimes, go along with them to their benefice, but accompanies them to the very grave. And for the most part an ordinary cheesemonger or plumseller that scarce ever heard of a University shall write much better sense, and more to the purpose than these young philosophers, who injudiciously hunting only for great words, make themselves learnedly ridiculous.¹

1. Eachard's tract is reprinted in Edward Arber's *English Garner* (1888) v. 7. The quotation is from v. 7, p. 263.

The demand for the cultivation of the "plain style" in preaching was a protest against the divorce of the language of the pulpit from the language of the people. Samuel Johnson attributed the success of the Methodist preachers to the fact they expressed themselves "in plain and familiar manner, which is the only way to do good to the common people."² John Wesley deliberately cultivated a plain style. In a letter to a young clergyman he indicates that he had expended a considerable effort to develop a plain style:

Clearness in particular is necessary for you and me, because we are to instruct people of the lowest understanding. Therefore we, above all, if we think with the wise, yet must speak with the vulgar. We should constantly use the common, little, easy words (so they are pure and proper) which our language affords. When I had been a member of the University about ten years I wrote and talked much as you do now. But when I talked to plain people in the Castle or the town, I observed they gaped and stared. This quickly obliged me to alter my style and adopt the language of those I spoke to.³

Anyone who wants to communicate in the pulpit must make a comparable effort to express himself in the language of the people.

In pioneer communities on this continent the regularly trained clergy of the orthodox churches were often less successful in gathering congregations and building up the church than semi-literate circuit riders. Such men as Lorenze Dow and Peter Cartwright had little formal education, but they were able to communicate effectively with their audiences because they spoke in the common idiom. The regularly trained clergy sometimes failed where these men succeeded. Peter Cartwright stated:

I do not wish to undervalue education, but really I have seen so many of these educated preachers who forcibly reminded me of lettuce growing under the shade of a peach tree, or like a gosling that had got the straddle by wading in the dew, that I turn away sick and faint.⁴

He tells of a Presbyterian minister who was "a pious, good man, much devoted to prayer," who laboured for a time in Springfield with little success:

He was a very well educated man, and had regularly studied theology in some of the Eastern states. . . . He brought with him a number of old manuscript sermons and read them to the people. . . . He soon saw and felt that he had no adaptation to the country or the people. I told him he must quit reading his old manuscript sermons, and learn to speak extemporaneously: that the Western people were born and reared in hard times, and were an outspoken and off-hand people; that if he did not adopt this manner of preaching, the Methodists would set the whole Western world on fire before he would light his match.⁵

After a short and unhappy ministry he left for parts unknown. This pattern of learning, piety and zeal being short-circuited because of uncommunicative preaching was repeated endlessly.

2. James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson* (July 30, 1763).

3. Letter dated July 15, 1764, in George Eayrs, *Letters of John Wesley* (1915), p. 457.

4. Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography*, edited by C. L. Wallis (N.Y., Abingdon, 1956), p. 64.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

There is reason to fear that it is still being repeated. The growth of the cults may be due, in part at least, to the fact that their spokesmen are more skilled than our orthodox clergy in communicating with the people. What the propagandists of the cults have to say may be thin in content and faulty in logic, but if it holds the attention and captures the interest of those addressed it may succeed where orthodox preaching fails. In writing of the growth of the cults in Alberta, W. E. Mann noted that the Bible Colleges and training institutes gave their graduates skills useful in the pastorate, and placed particular emphasis upon their courses in public speaking.

At the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute, for example, the public speaking course dealt with all the devices of mass appeal, such as the use of the voice, gesture and timing and the importance of imagery. The result was that Bible school graduates were usually impressive speakers.⁶

In this connection he quotes an Alberta pastor making a statement which is very similar in its import to the statement made by Peter Cartwright:

The theological colleges are on the spot. They can't give a man the real training for preaching, and when the men get out here they don't know how to go about their job, and their sermons are dull.⁷

In speaking to the students of the Free Church College, Glasgow, in 1880, Marcus Dods observed that the church's colleges turned out educated theologians who were unable to communicate their knowledge.

There is a greater waste of the raw material of good preaching among ourselves than, I suppose, among any other body of Christians. . . . Our young ministers are full of unavailable resources, and are as helpless in presence of a congregation as a historian in presence of an invading army.⁸

The waste continues, and our seminary graduates are still filled with unavailable resources.

All this is not an argument for less attention to be given to the content of preaching. It is an argument for more attention to be given to the style of preaching. Particularly it is an argument for more attention to be given to the cultivation of an oral style in preaching.

II

From the time of Aristotle it has been recognized that there is a difference between the oral and the literary styles, between words arranged to be heard by the ear, and words arranged to be read by the eye. Speech and writing are two different media of communication. What is effective in one may not be effective in the other. As one might expect, the people who are concerned with broadcast speech are particularly sensitive to the difference which

6. W. E. Mann, *Sect, Cult and Church in Alberta* (Toronto, University Press, 1955), p. 102.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

8. Lecture, *On Preaching in Erasmus and other Essays* (1892), p. 318.

exists between the two media. In the *Broadcast Word*, A. Lloyd James is emphatic in stating the difference between the language of speech and the language of writing:

The so-called literary language, a thing unfit for speech, unsuited to the rough and tumble of life, has dominated us for centuries. It is worshipped by everybody. Those who cannot use it are refused admittance to schools and colleges: prigs and pedants try to speak it; and unhappy people, who ought to know better, have come to regard its rules and regulations as binding upon the daily converse of their lives.⁹

He insists that writing is one thing, and speaking is another, and that the real language of speech can never be written:

Its medium is not the printed word, but the lively, colourful, vigorous aspect of human behaviour that men call speech. And nothing that man can do will put any of it on paper. It dwells apart in the realm of sound: the eye has never seen it, nor the hand made it.¹⁰

The language of preaching is the language of speech. The manuscript of a sermon bears the same relation to a sermon preached as the script of a play to the play delivered on the stage. The play comes to life when the black marks on the script are communicated through the words and actions of the players. The sermon comes to life when the black marks on the manuscript are communicated through the voice and gestures of the preacher.

In his autobiography Edwin Bok tells of sending a report of an interview with Mark Twain for the author's approval. Mark Twain replied that while the report was an accurate transcript of what he had said during the interview he did not want it published.

No, no—it is like most interviews, pure twaddle, and valueless. For several quite plain and simple reasons an interview must, as a rule, be an absurdity. And chiefly for this reason; it is an attempt to use a boat on land, or a wagon on water, to speak figuratively. Spoken speech is one thing, written speech is quite another. Print is a proper vehicle for the latter, but it isn't for the former. The moment talk is put into print you recognize that it is not what it was when you heard it; you perceive that an immense something has disappeared from it. That is its soul. You have nothing but a dead carcass left on your hands. Color, play of feature, and the varying modulations of voice, the laugh, the smile, the informing inflections, everything that gave that body warmth, grace, friendliness and charm, and commended it to your affection, or at least to your tolerance, is gone, and nothing is left but a palid, stiff, and repulsive cadaver.¹¹

One of the disadvantages of attempting to develop a sermonic style through a study of the printed sermons of successful preachers lies in this difference which exists between speech and print. No transcript of a speech or sermon can record the pauses, the hesitations, or the subtle intonations which may have been used in the oral delivery of the material studied. There is also the possibility that in being edited for publication certain features of the oral

9. A. Lloyd James, *The Broadcast Word* (London, 1935), p. 4.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

11. *The Americanization of Edward Bok* (N.Y., 1937), p. 205.

style may have vanished. The printed text of a speech or sermon is, as Mark Twain said of Bok's report of his interview, a carcass from which the life has fled.

III

Since there is this difference between speech and writing, the effectiveness of the sermon, as a medium of communication, depends largely upon its adaptation to the medium of speech. Henry Ward Beecher, who knew quite a lot about the art of preaching, was emphatic in urging that the preacher should avoid the literary style.

Above all other men the preacher should avoid what may be called a literary style as distinguished from a natural one: and by a "literary style," technically so called, I understand one in which abound these two elements—the artificial structure of sentences, and the use of words and phrases peculiar to literature alone, and not to common life. Involved sentences, crooked, circuitous and parenthetical, no matter how musically they may be balanced, are prejudicial to a facile understanding of the truth.¹²

It will be noticed that this prescription for pulpit style is couched in negative terms, as the avoidance of the artificial structure of the literary sentence, the avoidance of literary language, and the avoidance of expressions which may be prejudicial to ease of comprehension. Positively the prescription may be given as adapting plain talk to the pulpit, and transferring to pulpit discourse the idiom of conversation.

Probably no cut and dried formula can ever be given for an effective oral style, because there are an infinite number of such styles. People do not speak alike in conversation. Our talk reflects our training, our background, our reading, and our habits of thought. Boswell reports that when Samuel Johnson was on his death-bed his physician, in his best bedside manner expressed the hope that he was better. Johnson answered "No, sir. You cannot conceive with what acceleration I advance towards death!" He was speaking in a manner which was habitual with him. Long habits of precision of speech and an unusually rich vocabulary gave him a conversational style which, in most people, would have sounded ridiculously pompous. To him it was natural. It is possible that an effective oral style may vary from individual to individual and yet be a natural, unaffected and sincere form of expression.

In public discourse the style adopted should not only be a style suited to the habits, temperament and character of the speaker; it must also *appear* as natural to the audience. An actor on the stage has to exaggerate certain movements and gestures to make them appear "natural" to an audience viewing them from a distance. He has to exaggerate certain emphases in his speeches to have an emphasis apparent at all. It is possible that an effective oral style in public discourse may require that the speaker be "a bit of an actor" to give an impression of naturalness. To speak to two or

12. H. W. Beecher, *Yale Lectures on Preaching*, First series, Lecture IX.

three hundred people at once is not a natural setting for conversation. To develop a conversational style of delivery in this setting requires—paradoxical as it may seem—some degree of artifice.

While recognizing that wide variations may exist in effective oral styles it is possible to single out certain factors which are likely to contribute to the effectiveness of pulpit discourse. Certain elements of plain talk can be carried, with advantage, into the pulpit.

Plain talk, for instance, is always adapted to a particular audience on a particular occasion. The literary style is more general, because the man who writes is aware that he is addressing an unseen audience in a variety of situations. The man who speaks is addressing a specific group in a specific situation. There can be an intimacy and warmth in speech which cannot be conveyed in writing. The intimacy may be expressed in a greater use of personal pronouns, "I," "you," "we," "us," "our," and so on.¹³ It may be expressed in personal references, in references to the immediate situation, or to items and experiences of which speaker and audience share a common knowledge. In some way the bridge between the "cold, celestial certainties" and living men and women in the audience, must be crossed by the speaker. He must strive to make them feel that this message is for them in particular. Phillips Brooks once observed that the main difference in sermons is that some sermons are, and other sermons are not, conscious of an audience. If they are conscious of the audience they are "enthusiastic, personal, warm." If not, they are "calm, abstract, cold."¹⁴

Plain talk is less formal and less precise than literary composition. Contractions and colloquial expressions which one would hesitate to use in print are not only quite acceptable, but quite effective in speech. Words and expressions may have long currency in common speech before they gain acceptance in literary usage. Effective public discourse will always be closer to conversational usage than to literary usage.

Transitions between ideas, and the order followed in the arrangement of ideas, are normally more important in oral than in literary usage. If we fail on a first reading to see the connection between one paragraph and the next, or between one thought and another, we can go back over what we have read, or pause to reflect. In listening to oral discourse there are no such opportunities. The connection between one step in an argument and the next must be seen at once, or it is not likely to be seen at all. As applied to the sermon this consideration suggests the value of a carefully planned structure, with divisions of thought which are obvious to the listener, and which have a logical and a climatic order.

Oral style, finally, is marked by vividness, energy, and forcefulness. Complex sentences, complicated syntax which obscures thought and meaning

13. Helpful studies of characteristics of oral style are given in Gladys Borcher, "An Approach to the Problem of Oral Style," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, XXII, 2 (1936), p. 114ff., and C. H. Woolbert, "Speaking and Writing—A study of differences," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, VIII, 3 (1922), pp. 271-285.

14. Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (1886), p. 172.

should be studiously avoided. The spoken word must have immediate intelligibility. Words carrying emotional overtones, words which have familiar associations, and which call up images in the minds of the listeners, give to oral style a forcefulness which is direct and vivid. It was sound advice which Henry Ward Beecher gave when he counselled preachers to use homely words:

Use homely words—those which people are used to, and which suggest many things to them. The words that we heard in our childhood store up in themselves sweetness and flavor that make them precious all our life long afterwards. . . . The words which, from the cradle to the grave, have been the vehicles of love, trust, praise, hope, joy, anger, and hate, are not simply words, but like paper, are what they are by virtue of the things written on them.¹⁵

Words which have had long experience written into them, memories of sensations of sight, sound, taste, or movement, are useful in any style, but particularly so in an oral style. The preacher, as an artist in words—and he is an artist in the sense that he is striving to create an effect with words—should be as sensitive as the poet to the connotation and the sound of words. As Pope expressed it:

'Tis not enough no harshness gives offence:
The sound must seem an echo of the sense.

The substitution of the word *rings* would ruin the effect of the line,

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day.

Cardinal Wolsey's farewell speech would be marred if he had spoken of being left *nude* to his enemies instead of *naked* to his enemies. By the dictionary *rings* and *tolls*, *nude* and *naked* may be identical in meaning. They are not identical in the total meaning they convey. The more sensitive we become to this element in speech, the echoic qualities of words, their emotional overtones, which are not charted in the lexicons, the better use we can make of the arts of language.

IV

If it is difficult to give a definition of what constitutes an oral style it is even more difficult to attempt to give a prescription for acquiring it. The first step is probably that of recognizing the difference which does exist between the two styles employed in effective writing and effective speech, and to shape the sermon, from the first stages of its planning, to the polishing of the final draft, for oral delivery.

The second step which may be suggested is to expend more effort than most of us have been disposed to spend on the structure and diction of our sermons. The better our material is, the more is it deserving of being expressed as effectively as possible. If John Henry Newman had to write

15. *Lectures on Preaching*, First series, Lecture IX.

out his sermons three times, perhaps some of us should write ours at least twice. Cicero and Quintilian, whom the ancients regarded as masters of the oral style, asserted that the pen was the best teacher of eloquence.

It is in writing that eloquence has its roots and foundations; it is writing that provides that holy of holies where the wealth of oratory is stored, and whence it is produced to meet the demand of sudden emergencies.¹⁶

All this brings us to the paradoxical position of asserting that the best means of developing an oral style is to develop a literary style. The development of an ear for words, for enrichment of vocabulary, the facility in the use of words which come through careful writing contribute to forcefulness and precision in speech. The more sensitive we become to the sounds and rhythms and patterns of language the more aware we are likely to be of the difference between speech and writing. The seminarian's acquisition of a literary style is not necessarily a handicap to the quest for plain talk in the pulpit. It can lead, and should lead, to plain talk with good sense.

16. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, Book X, iii, 3.