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This chapter is taken from his book Preach On! (Broadman and Holdman, 1984). In it Smith discusses styles of preaching and offers suggestions to help preachers improve their style of preaching.

Styles of Preaching

A Definition of Style

Style is the manner in which a speaker uses language in expressing thought. Sometimes great ideas tend not to reach an audience because the style of the message lacks skillful and artistic expression. Plain speech offers dignity, power, and beauty to the message. An effective pulpit presentation should be free from crudeness and coarseness of language. Since the preacher is one who dares to speak for God, only the best possible language should be utilized. The use of language reveals not only the beauty or ugliness of an idea but also is an indication of the nature of the speaker's personality.

Style is the uniqueness of the preacher's way of communication. Style is the mirror of the thought and thought forms of the preacher. The personality, natural mental gifts, training, and cultural tastes are components which constitute style. Nevertheless, a person can improve upon style by studying grammar, logic, rhetoric, and English composition. The writer of this manuscript painfully plods along almost daily in pursuit of excellence in these technical areas which produce beauty and clarity of style. Three factors which seem to be basic to the acquiring of an effective style are thought, audience, and sincerity.

Three Basic Factors for Acquiring an Effective Preaching Style

The speaker should have something worthwhile to say. Skill in the transmission of verbal symbolism is of no avail if the speaker has no message. The one who speaks for God has a message of ultimate worth. It is necessary for the messenger to master the message. Too much ornamentation can overdress the style so that the audience misses the message.

The audience must always be kept in mind. To whom are you speaking? and how well read are they? are important questions. What kind of language must you use to effectively communicate with them? A professional paper is in order when appearing before seminarians and professors. They will understand the technical language of seminary studies. Critical hearers who are not seminary trained will desire logical and precise expression. Average audiences prefer concrete words to the abstract and familiar words to the technical. But all audiences demand sincerity.

Sincerity of presentation means being honest in thought and delivery. The ideas given in a message should flow from the conviction level of the speaker. Though the preacher may have doubts, the sermon is no place for those doubts to be aired. Preaching must always be a persuasive presentation. In influencing the audience to accept the message, no imitation of other effective speakers and no sub-professional circus-like antics should be employed because this kind of behavior is devoid of sincerity and promotes sensationalism.

Enriching the Three Basic Factors of Preaching Style

Thought, audience, and sincerity are three basic factors for acquiring an effective style. Each speaker can improve the quality of his or her speaking style by enriching the three basic factors with systematic, varied reading of good literature, including notable speeches. Such reading will make clear the difference between written and oral style. Speech style makes greater use of interpolations, asides, editorial comments, personal pronouns in the first or second person, interrogatives, contractions, broken sentences, and repetition. The language of written prose differs from good oral style. A study of excellent literature challenges the preacher to improve personal standards. *Roget's Thesaurus*, with its array of synonyms, and an up-to-date dictionary, which provides a record of current usage, belong on every speaker's bookshelf. An excellent rule of preaching is to cultivate daily an appetite for the study of words. An effective student of preaching will taste words with the sensitivity of a gourmet who is an authority on the location of the best restaurants in town. The student will select verbs carefully. Whenever possible the use of the verb to be will be sparsely used. Most of the time it should be used to create a pensive or pondering mood. For example:

God is our refuge and strength (Ps. 46:1).

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? (Ps. 27:1).

Assertion verbs are more potent and pungent than the verb *to be*. Here are a few: *enrich*, *enhance*, *constitutes*, *undergirds*, *implies*, *fortifies*, and *motivates*.

Dynamic verbs are most effective for creating vibrancy and vitality. Notice the effect of the following:

A loveless heart is *eroded* by hatred, his voice *thundered*. The child *stormed* out of the classroom. Fear *froze* the hearts of the disciples.

Be careful of redundancy or the unnecessary repetition of words. Sometimes this is called tautology. Examples of tautology are: learning disciples; volumes of books; biography of Paul's life.

Some words have similar meanings but are not interchangeable, such as *illusion* and *allusion*; *climax* and *conclusion*; and *generous* and *gracious*. Some terms are pronounced exactly alike but have different meanings, such as *alter* and *altar*; *gait* and *gate*; *principle* and *principal*; *capital* and *capitol*; *complement* and *compliment*; *raise* and *raze*; and *right*, and *write*.

As you know, a large part of English vocabulary has its origin in Latin. In understanding English better, one should become acquainted with Latin roots. Consider the English word *animal* which comes from the Latin *anima*. In Latin, *anima* means life, breath, soul, or spirit. So from the Latin stem *anim*, a number of English words were born: *animalcule*, a tiny live thing; *animate*, to breathe life into; *equanimity*, equal; *magnanimous*, of large or noble spirit; *unanimous*, one mind; *inanimate*, without life; *animosity*, enmity; *pusillanimous*, coward; and *animadvert*, to turn the mind to, to criticize. Now, look now at the stem of *magnus* which in English means large: *magnate*, an important person in business or industry; *magnify*, to make

large; *magnificence*, splendor, grandeur, great or greatness; *magniloquent*, speaking in big terms of oratory or flowery language; *magnitude*, big or great; and *magnum opus*, a great or important literary work.

The preacher would do well to study the Latin stems of words now used in conversational English. This study will reap the rich rewards in speaking which the pianist derives from a daily and disciplined practice of scales in music. Such an exercise with the word *benevolence* would reveal: *bene* (well) *volens* (wishing), which means wishing others well. Every church has a deacons' or benevolence fund used to assist the poor and needy. *Bene* is also found in other words that the preacher will need in his or her vocabulary, such as *benefit*, *beneficiary*, *benediction*, and *benefactor*. Every preacher has to use the stem of *volens*, which in English means wishing, *volition*, *voluntary*, *volunteer*.

Every preacher uses the word *benediction*. The word comes from two Latin stems: *bene* (well) and *dicere* (to tell or to say), hence, benediction literally means to say well, or saying well. The studious preacher cannot help but be intrigued with the word *benefactor* (*facere*, to do or make; *bene*, well), hence, benefactor means well doer. From the stem of *facere* the following English words emerge: *factor*, *factory*, *manufacture*, *fact*, *factotum*, and *factual*.

Other interesting word studies in Latin are *signa* and *portare*. From *signa* (sign), we get such words as *sign*, *insignia*, *signify*, *design*, *signature*, and *insignificant*. From *porta* (to carry), we get such words as *porter*, *portable*, *reporter*, *deport*, *import*, and *export*.

The preacher who is serious about becoming a master of spoken English should have an elementary introduction to Greek stems, as well as the most commonly used Latin stems. Learning these stems need not be painful. It can become a hobby. The preacher may make a scrapbook for the weekly enrichment of his or her vocabulary. Let the student now take a look at the Greek word *monos*, for one. From *monos* (one), we get the following words: *monocle*, a glass for one eye; *monogamy*, one marriage; *monotheism*, one God; *monotone*, speaking in one tone; *monologue*, speech of one person; and *monosyllable*, a word of one syllable.

Because the meaning of words change, the preacher should read current literature on word usage and consult the dictionary for acceptable English terminology. More than three hundred years ago, many English words meant just the opposite of what they mean in today's world. The Old English word *stink* referred to any odor at all and *amusing* meant amazing, and *villain* was applied to one who worked in a villa, and a *hussy* was a housewife.

The study of the Bible also requires the preacher to be sensitive to idioms and patterns of thought that are not germane to current language practices. The average preacher may harm the honor of those who translated the King James Bible; and he or she may do violence to those Scriptures if the preacher is not aware of the changes that have taken place in the English language since the King James Version of the Bible was written. For example, in King James' English, *conversation* meant conduct, *ghost* meant spirit, *purchase a good degree* meant to gain a good standing, and *prevent* meant to precede, and *all* meant allow. Some three hundred English words in the King James Version of the Bible are substantially different from what those words now convey. The student of preaching who is not a student of biblical Hebrew and Greek can obtain the help that is needed in correct word interpretation by using some of the most recent translations and research and resource materials at reputable Bible book stores. Professors in local seminaries are eager to discuss with persons the interpretations of the Scriptures.

Because language is constantly changing, the ever-learning student of preaching may find

invaluable assistance from reading the monthly issues of *Reader's Digest*. This author has discovered pleasure and new knowledge from reading the following articles in *Reader's Digest*: "Toward Picturesque Speech," "It Pays to Enrich Your Word Power," "Points to Ponder," and "All in a Day's Work."

Those who can afford it should read materials such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, and editorial comments of persons who write for major newspapers as well as magazines, such as *Time* and *Newsweek*.

In the study of language, the student is concerned about the origin of words. The shades of meaning and the changes in the meanings of words are very important things to know. The emotional meaning of words in a specific cultural setting or before a particular audience and the possible images words can conjure in the minds of the audience are matters which should claim the attention of each person who studies style in speaking. Words have color, size, weight, feeling, force, movement, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Words can express anger, anxiety, contempt, disappointment, fear, gratitude, grief, hate, hope, jealousy, joy, love, pity, and pride. Learning the mastery of words helps to determine not so much the content as the style of the message. As the artist skillfully uses paints, pigments, and brushes, so does the preacher use language to paint, prove, and persuade the hearers.

Shades of Meaning of Words

The study of language enables the preacher to use words with the same selectivity as a trained singer. The pitch, key, and tone with which notes are sung or words are expressed create the mood of acceptance or rejection. The way a word or a combination of words is used can motivate an audience to behave as a mob or to be as pliable as putty to the verbal invitations of the preacher. Therefore, the power of the message is influenced by the manner in which the message is presented. Clear, convincing communication employed by the selectivity of a sensitive and trained spokesperson constitutes a combination of skill in word choice and the artistic articulation of vocabulary in the delivery of the sermon.

The Study of Word Choice

There are rules which determine literary excellence. The proper use of these rules will enable the speaker or writer to develop skill in both prose and poetic diction. Some of these rules are:

1. In the choice of words, let the paramount consideration be exactness.
2. Seek to have at your command more than one expression for the same thing.
3. Cultivate the habit of observing the derivation and history of words.
4. Enlarge your vocabulary by diligent study of usage by the best writers.
5. Beware of words too new to have a recognized place in the language.
6. Be sure of ample justification before coining new formations or compounds.
7. Be suspicious of current newspaper and colloquial terms.
8. Do not, out of mere affectation, indulge an ancient word or archaic term foreign to the background of your audience.
9. Do not employ words peculiar to a limited section of the country unless you are speaking in that region and are confident that you will not insult the hearers by using those words.
10. Do not use technical terms where they are not likely to be understood.
11. Do not use a foreign word unless you are sure it expresses an idea for which there are no fitting terms in English.

12. Use no expression thoughtlessly.
13. Avoid the use of clichés and timeworn expressions or slogans that have been overused.
14. Enlarge your speaking vocabulary by reading excellent literature and by cultivating a taste for the meaning of words.
15. A study of poetic and prose diction will add color and richness to your own use of words.

The person who stands in the pulpit would do well to study poetic diction because poetry is the language of emotion and imagination. A good sermon should appeal to emotion and imagination as well as to reason. Let us look at some rules of poetic diction.

The Study of Poetic Diction

The Rules of Poetic Diction

Poetic diction abbreviates or omits particles. For example, "When day was gone." *The* is omitted. "Not fearing toil nor length of weary days." This form of poetic diction was found in Wordsworth's poetic diction.

Browning omitted the relative pronoun. "You have the sunrise now, joins truth to truth." *That* is omitted. "The hills which he so oft had climbed." "Oft" takes the place of *often*. For the sake of sound and brevity, poetic diction makes free use of abbreviation.

Many Black preachers are masters of poetic diction. They are skilled in word painting and poetic picturesqueness. James Weldon Johnson gives excellent examples of poetic diction in his classic book of Black sermons called God's Trombones.

At Bishop College in Dallas, Texas, at the forty-sixth annual Lacy Kirk Williams Institute for the Ministry and the Laity, Dr. Gardner C. Taylor used poetic picturesqueness in a message entitled "It Is Finished." In his conclusion, Dr. Taylor placed upon the lips of Jesus these words:

"Father, I turn myself over to Thee. The battle is fought and the victory has been won.

"Father, the price has been paid.

"Father, hell has lost.

"Father, God has won.

"Father, evil has shot its last bullet.

"Father, the tide of destruction has been turned back.

"Father, I am coming home.

"Angels, get my mansion ready! I'm coming home!"

Skillful Use of Poetic Diction by Black Preachers

In poetic picturesqueness, the preacher may use an epithet! An epithet is a descriptive adjective. The root or derivation of epithet comes from the Greek *epi* which means from, and *tithemi*, to add. Together, these words mean to give some descriptive or characterizing feature. First of all, there is the essential epithet which expresses some quality in a noun, such as "drenching waves" and "green pastures." Second, there is the decorative epithet, such as "the beaten work of mountain chains surrounding the holy city." Third, there are phrase epithets, such as this

expression from Keats: "So those two brothers, with their murdered man rode past fair Florence." Charles Lamb gives this example: "While childhood, and while dreams, reducing childhood, shall be left, imagination shall not have spread her holy wings totally to fly the earth."

Dr. Emmanuel Scott (now deceased) is known from coast to coast for his unique use of poetic diction. As a Bishop College-trained scholar, no Baptist pulpiteer surpasses his use of alliteration, which is the name given to a near recurrence of the same initial sound. It is a very natural, stylistic device in English. Of the famous English poets, Swinburne made free use of alliterative verse. However, Dr. Scott gives a more contemporary use of alliteration in his sermon book, The Gospel for the Ghetto.² Numerous examples of alliteration appear on almost every page. An example of alliteration comes from the preaching of the author of this manuscript when he writes: "The preacher points his hearers away from himself to the powerful and profound person of Jesus Christ." The words beginning with the letter *p* set up the musical structure of alliterative expression.

Sometimes, poetic diction can be overworked in preaching. When this occurs, people forget the message and remember only the decorative speech. But, when poetic diction is not overdone, the sermon has a quality of beauty.

Contrasting Poetic Diction with Prose Diction

Prose diction is different from poetic diction. It is more popular and is in greater use than poetic diction. Teachers of speech and of preaching counsel students to give greater attention to prose diction than to poetic diction. *Prose* comes from the Latin *prosa*. It is a contracted form of *prorsa*, which is a contraction of the compound *pro-versa*, an adjective feminine in form because the noun to be supplied is the feminine *oratio*, (discourse) the whole meaning, therefore, "straightforward discourse." Prose discourse is straightforward speaking in two ways. First of all, it is not changing the natural order of words; and, second, it is not departing from the common use of words. Prose arranges words according to the requirements of directness and emphasis. Poetic diction uses symbolic words. Prose diction uses presentive words. Presentive words are those which, by themselves, present a definite conception to the mind, such as nouns, verbs and, to a lesser degree, adjectives and adverbs.

The late Dr. Benjamin Mays, former president of Morehouse University in Atlanta, Georgia, and a popular Baptist preacher, is noted for his use of prose diction. In a speech given at Interdenominational Theological Center and on the campus of Gammon Theological Seminary, in August 1977, Dr. Mays used beautiful and lucid language. He said:

*Education is designed to train the mind to think clearly, logically and constructively; to train the heart to understand and sympathize with the aspirations, sufferings, and injustices of mankind; and to strengthen the will to act in the interest of the common person. To state the purpose in Christian perspective, the aim of education should be to glorify God and to serve humanity.*³

Dr. Mays preaches a simple but deep message. He is a paradoxical preacher in that he has the art of saying clearly things of a profound nature. The power of his presentation is clarity. His style is disarming because of the directness of his message. Each of his hearers could not help but feel the personal nature of the message. The preaching of Dr. Mays has movement so that the audience does not tire of hearing the sermon. When the conclusion of the sermon begins, the audience is sad because this master of prose diction will soon utter the last word of the message.

In concluding a sermon, no one could excel the late Dr. Sandy F. Ray in using prose diction through role playing. In a sermon called "Pilate's Dilemma," Dr. Ray said:

*Pilate, where are you? I saw you swinging on a dilemma. I saw you washing your hands. I heard your public admission that you found no fault in him. But you missed the boat by your failure to commit your life to him. You did not discern that this humble, cross-bound peasant was indeed The King.*⁴

Dr. Sandy F. Ray was a master of both poetic and prose diction. His sentences were short, crisp, and clear. His verbs were filled with energy. His sentences built to a climax. When his messages concluded with role playing, before taking his seat, he would always quote the verses of a hymn. The hymn would be related to the sermon and the words of the hymn would add poetic diction. In the sermon "Pilate's Dilemma," Dr. Ray quoted the words of "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus."

Not every preacher can be a Sandy F. Ray or a Robert G. Lee. But each preacher can improve in the use of poetic and prose diction simply by reading the sermons of the great preachers with an ear for discovering the mechanics, tools, and homiletical techniques that they used. After hearing preaching critically, the preacher can then attempt to develop his or her style by using the principles which have made the masters experts in communicating the gospel.

Notes

1. The widely accepted use of epithets belies the Greek origin and uses of the word in a derogatory sense. This is not my use of the term.
2. Emmanuel Scott, *The Gospel for the Ghetto* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1973).
3. The author copied the words from a speech by Dr. Mays.
4. Sandy F. Ray, *Journeying Through a Jungle* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979), p. 130.