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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Hints on the Use of the Voice.

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III. OUR MOTHER-TONGUE, AND HOW TO USE IT.

IN the previous sections we have considered the training of the vocal organs by the aid of other people's words; but, whilst we can recite the ballads and speeches of others, we have to form our own ways of speaking, and, in a measure, our own language. For this purpose we ought to make English a study, learning from everybody, and copying nobody. English is a strong language, and has great facilities for assimilating words from other lands. It is true that some of us are men of few words. A peasant (are there any left?) is supposed to be content with a vocabulary of 350 words; an average man has ten times as many; Gladstone had 10,000 at his command, and Shakespeare used 15,000. Saxon words appeal to the feelings, for they represent our mother-tongue; but for scientific and argumentative words we travel to France and Germany, and back to Rome and Greece. A word has not only to be fitly spoken, but fitly chosen. It is a great thing to steep our minds with the speech of Bunyan and Spurgeon, John Bright and Lord Shaftesbury, Prescott and Macaulay, Liddon and F. W. Robertson, Carlyle and Froude, Bradley and Ryle, Whately and Paley.

In speaking to ordinary people we should use ordinary words rather than what is technical, and if we find ourselves driven to use some out-of-the-way expression, or even to coin a new phrase, we ought to be able to follow it up with a simpler, though perhaps more roundabout, way of saying the same thing. We must think clearly if we would speak clearly, and the more freely we associate in the week with those whom we address on Sunday, the more easily we shall reach their understanding, secure their attention, and penetrate their heart. Our Lord evidently spoke in the vulgar tongue, and the common people

heard Him gladly ; but He did not use vulgarisms. There are a great many Americanisms floating about in our literature, and seeking admission into twentieth-century English. I do not suppose that we shall ever substitute a "limb" for a leg, or call the leg of a chicken its "second wing," or call insects "bugs," or beetles "hum-bugs," or grandees "big bugs," or the accompaniments of tea "fixings"; but there is a tendency to say "around" where we mean "round," and "back" for "ago"; "considerable" and "a few" and "real" are used as adverbs. Men of business "mail" a letter, and "write" their correspondent," and "resurrect" an old saying, and "enthuse" over a subject, and "erupt" on occasion. Politicians "stump" and "lobby" and "plank." There are even such inventions as "itemize," "burgle," "burglarize," "custodize," "housekeep." It must not be forgotten that some Americanisms are reminiscences of the English of the Pilgrim Fathers, as in the case of "calculate" and "reckon," of which the former is said to belong to the Northern States and the latter to the Southern. It is pretty certain that, if we accustom ourselves to Americanisms in ordinary colloquial speech, they will want to slip into our sermons, as in the case of the curate who was preaching against betting, and said that "ten to one" such a man would come to ruin. On the other hand, we must not be Johnsonian. We owe a great deal to Dr. Johnson, but the fashion of his age has passed away. It is no longer necessary to say "commence" for begin, or "vicinity" for neighbourhood, or to call a spade an "implement of husbandry," or a potato a "succulent esculent." The day has passed for telling a poor woman to "assume a recumbent posture," and so cause her to send out and borrow one.¹

Most of us drop into a slipshod style in speaking unless we practise writing. De Quincey, a master of English, once said that "faults of composition may be detected in every page of almost every book that is published." Perhaps even this little sentence has one little word in it which is open to criticism.

¹ See Ellice Hopkins's "Words for Working Men."

But we can correct what we have written, while we cannot call back what we have spoken. Though we learn most from sitting at the feet of good masters, we can gather many hints from books on English such as those of Trench and Abbott and Whately, and above all from that strange being Cobbett, whose criticisms on statesmen's speeches are delightful. One of our commonest faults when young is to begin every other sentence with the word "now"; another is to insert two "thats" where only one conjunction is called for; a third is to pile two or three adjectives upon one substantive; and a fourth is to use an adjective which adds no force to the substantive, as when we speak of a "flowing river." Perhaps the most uncomfortable thing for speaker and hearer is the involved sentence. We have begun it well, then we have modified it, then we have illustrated the modification, then we have tried to return to our original point, but cannot remember it, and we come to an awkward pause. I believe it is a rule in political speeches to make no pause. "Go, bungle on," as the African translation of one of our hymns says, but make no pause lest you should be heckled! Fortunately, the preacher is not likely to be heckled unless he is in the open air, and it is better for him to break away and start fresh with a new sentence than to "bungle on."

We have to remember one notable point in which Biblical English has given way to modern usage. It is in the use of the plural after two singular nouns. In old days we read, "My flesh and my heart faileth," but now we should substitute the word "fail" in ordinary English. Perhaps other grammatical changes may be found, but there are not many, and we are generally safe if we fortify the rules which we gather from the Bible by such as we may obtain from the other writers referred to.

SPEAKING AND PREACHING.

The practised thinker and writer ought to develop into a good speaker, but he sometimes fails miserably. He has not learnt the art of getting on his legs, the art of standing still,

and the art of sitting down. These are both mental and bodily acts. They come naturally to some people, but to others it is not so. Make up your mind beforehand how you are going to begin. Let your first sentences be short and attractive, not controversial. Put your hearers in good humour with you and with themselves. Then go steadily through the points you wish to press upon them, tying neither your arguments nor your literal legs into a knot. Then sit down. Alas! how often we fail here! We have nearly ended, but not quite. We are like ships making for the harbour, but just missing it. If we could only read the minds of our hearers, we should find them one and all saying, "I wish he would sit down." Let us remember that it is infinitely better to be too short than too long; but if we have thought out beforehand what we want to say and how we think of closing, there ought to be no difficulty in stopping at the right time and place. Haweis sometimes closed his sermon by the words: "I have nothing more to say."

The superiority of speaking over reading as a means of reaching the ear, mind, and heart of the audience is very great. What you sacrifice in form you gain in force. You look at the people and speak to them. In discussing his own case, Simeon of Cambridge said: "When I began I knew no more than a brute how to make a sermon. After a year or two I gave up writing and began to preach from notes; but I so stammered and stumbled that I felt this was worse than before, and I was obliged to take to a written sermon again. At last, however, the reading a sermon appeared to be so heavy and dull that I once more made an attempt with notes, and determined, if I did not now succeed, to give up preaching altogether." Various methods have been adopted to get rid of the difficulty here spoken of. I say nothing of those who pretend to speak whilst really they are reading, nor of those who learn their sermons by heart and say them over beforehand to their long-suffering wives and housekeepers. Some adopt the plan of catch-words written in a special way to remind the reader of a coming

sentence ; others put an analysis at the side, and if this fails them they can flee for refuge to the main body of the sermon ; others write the substance of what they wish to say ; but most draw up a skeleton—oh, terrible word !—let us rather say notes. Where these are carefully drawn up, the sermon may fairly be said to be extempore in form, but not unpremeditated in substance. Thus the steps we take are, first, to think out our main argument, then to put down its heads and illustrations, then to note its opening sentence and its last thought. Along with these processes we seek that fulness and brightness and force which can only come from the Father of lights. For one who is specially slow of speech, which is the case with the writer of these papers, great help is gained by Sunday-school teaching in early life and by preaching expository sermons—a kind of address which, if carefully studied beforehand, congregations much appreciate.

Mr. Haweis, in his "Thoughts for the Times," gives the following account of his first efforts :

"When I first began to preach in the East End of London I used to write elaborate sermons, but the people would not come to church. Then I thought I would preach extempore, so I went up one evening into the pulpit with my Bible only, and proposed to address the scanty congregation before me on the words, "Abide with us, for it is towards evening, and the day is far spent" (Luke xxiv. 29). I do not think I had any misgivings about my ability to go on, but when I had read the text over once I was glad to say it over again. I then found I had forgotten my first head, and went on to the second, but the instant I had begun the second I could recollect nothing but the first. It was too late then, so I tried the third, but of course that fitted in nowhere without the first and the second. So I read the text over again, and when I had done that I recollected another text that had nothing to do with it, and said that, and then I got exceedingly uncomfortable, and so did the congregation, and in about ten minutes from the commencement of my extempore sermon I read the text over again, and as nothing more occurred to me I was glad enough to leave off. After that my friends advised me to read my sermons, but I said, 'No, I am going to try the other plan now,' and so Sunday after Sunday I stammered on, and people said I did it to save myself trouble, and what a pity it was I should try to preach without book, and so forth. And for years extempore preaching was pain and labour to me. And now I am glad I did not give in, as I was on the point of giving in more than once."

The great dangers we have to guard against in extempore sermons are, Wandering from our subject, and Getting into

grooves, especially at the end. Sometimes the groove takes the form of fireworks. It is as if a notice were given: "The sermon will close with a display," etc. If oratory is natural to us, let us use it for our Master; but do not work yourself up into an artificial passion. "Quench not the Spirit"; but "the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets." Your business at the end of a sermon is generally either to recapitulate or, at least, to drive home what you have been teaching. There is an old saying which has much truth in it:

"Begin slow; aim low;
Rise higher; take fire;
When most impressed, be self-possessed;
Devoutly close; leave the issue with God."

John Bright was once asked by a young student what method he would recommend. He answered:

"I have never been in the habit of writing out my speeches, certainly not for more than thirty years past. The labour of writing is bad enough, and the labour of committing to memory would be intolerable; and speeches read to a meeting are not likely to be received with much favour. It is enough to think over what is to be said, and to form an outline in a few brief notes. But, first of all, a real knowledge of the subject to be spoken of is required; with that, practice should make speaking easy. As to what is best for the pulpit, I may not venture to say much. It would seem that rules applicable to other speaking will be equally applicable to the pulpit. But in a pulpit a man is expected to speak for a given time, on a great theme, and with less of exact material than is obtainable on other occasions and on ordinary subjects. And, further, a majority of preachers are not good speakers, and perhaps could not be made such. They have no natural gift for good speaking; they are not logical in mind, nor full of ideas, nor free of speech; and they have none of that natural readiness which is essential to a powerful and interesting speaker. It is possible, nay, perhaps very probable, that if reading sermons was abolished, while some sermons would be better than they are now, the majority of them would be simply chaos, and utterly unendurable to the most patient congregation. Given a man with knowledge of his subject, and a gift for public speaking, then I think reading a mischief; but given a man who knows little, and who has no gift of speaking, then reading seems to be inevitable, because speaking, as I deem it, is impossible. But it must be a terrible thing to have to read or speak a sermon every week on the same topic to the same people; terrible to the speaker, and hardly less so the hearers. Only men of great mind, great knowledge, and great power, can do this with success. I wonder that any man can do it! I often doubt if any man has ever done it. I forbear, therefore, from giving a strong opinion on the point you submit to me.

Where a man can speak, let him speak—it is no doubt most effective; but where a man cannot speak, he must read.”

The Bishop of Wakefield lately divided objectionable preachers according to their style into sesquipedalian, wishy-washy, pyrotechnic, anecdotal, sentimental, and paregoric; and in a discussion which followed his address, Lord Nelson, speaking as a layman, said that good preaching came from two things—a full heart and a full head. It seems but yesterday that Sir Squire Bancroft addressed some caustic remarks to the clergy on the need of naturalness in reading and preaching. Under the latter head he named the preachers who had most impressed him—namely, Magee, Stanley, Liddon, Temple, Farrar, Phillips Brooks, Spurgeon, Punshon, Beecher, Manning. Having heard all of these but the last, I venture to endorse the list; but what variety of style and treatment it reveals! Some names are missing from the list, especially Moody's. Every evangelist should study Moody's sermons—*e.g.*, the volumes entitled “The Great Salvation,” “The Way to God,” and “Stand Up for Jesus”; but I cannot speak up for his articulation.

I have not been dealing in these papers with the subject-matter of sermons, but with the use of the voice, and must abstain from discussing the preacher's message. Let me close, however, with some words written in the Bible of one of our greatest masters in the art of preaching, the late Dean McNeile:

“Thou must be true unto thyself
 If thou the truth wouldst teach;
 Thy soul must overflow, if thou
 Another soul wouldst reach;
 It needs the overflow of heart
 To give the lips full speech.

“Think truly; and thy thoughts
 Shall the world's famine feed.
 Speak truly; and each word of thine
 Shall be a fruitful seed.
 Live truly; and thy life shall be
 A grand and noble creed.”