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Steven P. Vitrano
Andrews University

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Making the Sermon Perfectly Clear

Steven P. Vitrano

CLARITY and coherence should characterize Christian preaching. If the preacher is to "encourage" and "charge" men "to lead a life worthy of God," (1 Thess. 2:12) what he says must not be muddled, ambiguous, or confusing. Careful consideration should be given to the following points that make for *clarity* in preaching:

Simplicity

Simplicity is the key to clarity. Simplicity, in this context, must not be confused with stupidity, dullness, or crudity. Rather, it should be understood in the sense that Ellen G. White uses the word. In *Gospel Workers*, page 170, she writes, "Ministers should present the truth in a clear, simple manner." What she means is perhaps best illustrated in the references she makes to the preaching of Jesus. For example:

In these words [sermon on the mount] spoken by the greatest Teacher the world has ever known, there is no parade of human eloquence. The language is plain, and the thoughts and sentiments are marked with the greatest simplicity. The poor, the unlearned, the most simple-minded, can understand them. —*Testimonies*, vol. 5, p. 254.

One of the great challenges in preaching is that of making the profound simple, of making clear to men who are finite what has been revealed by the One who is infinite.

One Central Theme or Subject

For the sake of clarity, every sermon should have one central theme or subject. This central idea should run throughout the sermon, and every other element in the sermon should be related

to it. This is because the average audience can not accommodate more than one basic concept in the time ordinarily given to a sermon. Moreover, the preacher can not adequately develop more than one theme in that amount of time. To burden the mind with too many unrelated ideas at any one time is to create confusion and bewilderment. It is to this point that Mrs. White speaks in *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 309, 319:

You have made of none effect many precious ideas, by mixing them with other thoughts which have come to your mind, but which had no bearing on the subject. That which is far from the subject under consideration should find no place in your discourses.

The ideal toward which to strive is that of gathering the whole of your sermon into what is called a "topic sentence." When you can summarize in one sentence all that the sermon is designed to say, you have a sermon that, in this respect at least, is characterized by clarity.

The "Precise" Word

It is said of Jesus that He "did not use long and difficult words in His discourses; He used plain language, adapted to the minds of the common people."—*Gospel Workers*, p. 169. This does not encourage indolence in vocabulary development. While we should use simple words that are commonly understood, we need to use the "precise" word. This is the word that best expresses the thought. To do this requires a large vocabulary rather than a small one. The more words you know, the better able you are to choose the right word.

You will recall from the statement quoted above that Jesus used "plain language." This does not mean that Jesus disregarded the rules of grammar and syntax. His speech was not uncouth just because it was "plain." His was a proper usage of the language of the people. His sentences were simple, uncomplicated, and short.

Too often we carry the impression that good grammar and syntax go with sophisticated eloquence but not with "plain language." This is not so. These rules were devised in order to make for clarity and precision of expression.

Proficiency in the use of language does not come by accident. While it is true that some have more of a "gift" for fluency in speech than others, even the gifted must strive for excellence. In this striving two things bring rich rewards—reading and writing.

Read material that is well written but not difficult and complicated. Read that which impresses you with its simplicity and clarity, but which is rich in thought and profound in truth. As you read be sensitive to that which makes what you read clear and understandable. Notice the choice of words, the way they are put together, the kind of sentence structure, the effectiveness of good grammar, and the development of the main theme or subject.

Write out what you plan to say. This is painful to be sure. But that is all it costs and the rewards to you in your ability to use language effectively far outweigh the cost. What a tragedy when a preacher gets into the pulpit and knows what he wants to say but just cannot put it into words! How different it might have been had he taken the time to put it into words before he entered the pulpit!

Read and write; write and read. You will find as time goes by that your speech will improve with the discipline. Clarity is worth every effort we make to achieve it, especially when it has to do with the sacred work of preaching. □