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

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bible-student_01.php

SIMPLICITY IN PREACHING

By the late DR J. C. RYLE
(sometime Bishop of Liverpool)

Simplicity in preaching is by no means easy to attain, for it is a very difficult thing to speak simple, clear, perspicuous, forcible English. Every word must be the right word and in its right place. To speak or write what will strike and stick, what at once pleases and is understood, what becomes assimilated and is not forgotten, is a very difficult thing indeed.

Five brief hints:

(1) Take care that you have a *clear view of the subject*, that you understand it thoroughly, know what you want to prove, teach or establish and wish to be remembered. Those who aim at nothing will hit nothing. Avoid obscure passages, fanciful subjects and 'accommodated' texts. Do not drag texts out of their contexts or import meanings into them that the Holy Ghost never intended. Choose plain, simple texts. Do not be afraid of making divisions in your addresses. Let there be order so carefully arranged that your points shall follow one another in their regularity. Such divisions are like hooks, pegs and shelves in the mind.

(2) Use as far as you can *simple words*, words in daily common use among the people. Beware of using long 'dictionary' words. Talk of happiness rather than 'felicity', of 'almighty' rather than 'omnipotent', 'lessen' rather than 'diminish.' Without a simple vocabulary simplicity in preaching cannot be attained, but there is no need always to use Saxon English.

(3) Aim at a *simple style* of composition. Avoid long involved sentences. Cultivate the short sentence for the long and involved sentence with many colons, semi-colons and parentheses is fatal to all simplicity. Make use of epigrammatic sentences, e.g.,

* 'Simplicity in Preaching' was given as a lecture in St. Paul's Cathedral in 1876 and was subsequently published in book form but the small book is long out of print. We have been able to make the following summary and hope it will prove of help to readers. Bishop Ryle was himself such a master of the art of clear speech that his advice is worthy of close attention. R.G.L. in *The Witness*.

'What we weave in time we wear in Eternity,' 'he that begins with prayer will end with praise,' etc. Proverbial and antithetical sayings give clearness and force to a sermon.

(4) Use *directness in speaking* and writing. Say 'I' and 'you' rather than 'we'. Do not mind if directness brings criticism. Get into the habit of talking plainly to the people.

(5) Call in *the aid of illustration*. The Lord constantly illustrated from everything around Him. If you illustrate by means of stories tell them naturally. Don't overdo an illustration or carry it too far.

Take time and trouble in preparation. Read good models, especially the Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Shakespeare. Beware of trying to preach 'beautiful', 'clever,' or 'popular' sermons. If Christ crucified has not His rightful place, if sin is not exposed as it should be, and people not plainly told what they ought to be and do, your preaching is of no use.

A good, lively, delivery is necessary. There should be no mumbling or droning.

All the simplicity in the world is useless without prayer for God's blessing and without a life corresponding in some measure to what we preach. Let us never forget to accompany our preaching with holy living and fervent prayer.