

Action in the Pulpit

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I purpose to speak this morning on Action in the Pulpit. It is not my purpose to trespass upon the ground occupied by the professors of Homiletics and Vocal Expression, but unfortunately too many of our students go out of college and go to preaching without taking those two courses. And then, those who do take those courses frequently need to be reminded again and again of the things learned from the professors and the textbook. As the prophet said long ago "Line upon line, line upon line; precept upon precept, precept upon precept," here a little and there a little, we still have to do a great deal of repeating in order to beat things into the minds of some people. You have all heard more than once what Demosthenes said about this matter. On being asked what was the first thing in oratory, he said, "Action." "What is the second thing?" "Action." "What is the third?" "Action."

But do not be mistaken, and think that Demosthenes meant that action was all; -- that action without thought is oratory. We know from the contents of his great addresses, that he meant this: when you appear before an audience with a speech in your head, from this point forward everything depends on action, including the voice as well as the hands. What would the grandest speech that he ever delivered have amounted to, if he had stood up before a Greek audience and held it in his hands, or laid it on the table and read it to them? He knew very well that such a speech as that would never arouse the people to war against Philip. The bema on which he spoke is still preserved in Athens. It is a solid block of stone with nothing on which to lay a book or a manuscript. Having then, the thought, the first and the second and the third thing with him was action.

Neither did Demosthenes mean to affirm that every kind of action a man might indulge in is first or second or third in oratory, but appropriate action. Action that is appropriate to the thoughts which the orator desired to drive home to the minds and hearts of his hearers; for this is the value of action in the pulpit or on the rostrum.

Jesus was an orator. The highest type of oratory ever heard on earth was his. Unlike Demosthenes, he did not depend on action. He took his seat on the side of the mountain with the multitude stretched out before him, or he sat in a boat at the edge of the water and spoke to the multitude stretched out before him on the shore. But Jesus had words to speak so far superior to any that Demosthenes or any other

orator ever uttered, that he depended upon them for the effect of his speeches; and it was not in vain.

The apostle Paul, so far as we have learned from Luke, indulged in little action when speaking; but that action had a telling effect. When he stood before a strange audience in Antioch of Pisidia, having been called out of the audience by the ruler of the synagogue who said to him and Barnabas, "Brethren, if ye have any words of exhortation for the people, say on," he stood up in the midst of the audience and beckoned with his hand, before he uttered a word. Every man knew what that gesture meant. They knew that the stranger had something to say to them that he thought worth hearing, so they listened. And once when a mob had taken him, and was beating him, and would have killed him, he was rescued by Lysias the chief captain and his band of soldiers; and was being taken into the castle. When he came up on the stairs leading into the castle, he begged the officer to allow him to speak to the people. They were crying out, "Away with such a man from the earth." The officer allowed him to speak, and Paul "beckoned with his hand." That looks like a very simple act, and it was. But there was something about that simple action that quelled that mob in a moment; and in the language of Luke, "There was a great silence." Then he made them a speech. A man who would get up before an audience in the present day and make no more gesticulation than that would scarcely be considered an orator. But it had its effect, and it might have it again.

There was another thing in the oratory of Paul so striking that it impressed Luke and he wrote it down. When Sergius Paulus was listening with great interest to Paul's preaching, and Bar-Jesus contradicted with great vehemence what he was saying, Luke says that Paul "fastened his eyes" upon the man. And that action, which would scarcely be called an action, was accompanied by the words, "O full of all guile and all villainy, thou son of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?" No doubt that fastening the eyes upon him drove home the words in a fashion that no motion of the hands or arms could have [a]ffected.

And again, when standing before the Sanhedrin whither he was brought by Lysias, he was there as a man accused of things worthy of death. The mob said, "Away with such a man from the earth." Very naturally the Roman officer expected him to have a down-cast countenance like a man guilty of wrong doing. There was silence for awhile, and not a man rose up to accuse him. He, though the accused, had to begin the proceedings. "Looking steadfastly on the council!" he said: "Men and brethren, I have lived before God in all good

conscience to this day.” That was bold. That was not the language of one who was guilty of wrong doing. He wore the calm, majestic, beaming face of an innocent man. How pusillanimous and contemptuous was the reply made by the chief priest: “Some of you who are standing near him, Smite him on the mouth.” It was done; yet with that calm face still beaming upon them he said, “God shall smite thee, thou whited wall. Sittest thou to judge me according to the law and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law?” And the chief captain saw the Jewish court torn all to pieces by the power of the man charged with things worthy of death. I wish I could have seen Paul’s face. There was something in the cast of his eye and expression of his countenance that was well calculated to overawe the wrong doers.

These are the only two characteristics of his action that are recorded, but these are enough to show mastery, self-reliance, and an overpowering force of character and manner. The best method I know of for a young man to acquire suitable action in the pulpit, or for an old man, for that matter, is to first find the faults of which you are guilty and correct them. The action that is left will be natural and effective like the actions of children at play.

I suggest as the first fault, that of the posture which you assume before the audience. Do not stand flat on both feet alike. (Speaker here assumed the faulty position described). That is the weakest attitude a man can assume. If a man should strike you in that attitude he would knock him over with a touch. Do not appear as though you were not sure where you stand, but stand in an easy, natural position. Your body will then be free, and you can use the hands and arms naturally.

Perhaps I might mention as the second correction, don’t keep your hands in your pockets while speaking. Keep your hands out of your pockets. How often you see a man in the pulpit (Illustrates). Then he thinks he ought to make a gesture (Illustrates, taking his hands out of his pockets and swinging them in a gesture, then nervously fumbling them back into pockets. [Laughter]. How many times I have seen that!

Now you will find, if you have already gotten into that habit, that the best way to break it up, is to break it up everywhere else. At home, in your room, or in company, and especially before ladies, do not cram your hands down in your pockets. Do not come in on a cold day and get up to the fireplace and (Illustrates, cramming hands in pockets). That is about as awkward a thing as you can do. And if the habit is so fastly fixed upon you that you can’t break it up, have somebody to sew those pockets up, or put some tight buttons on them. I guess that strikes a good many. Well, I hope you will feel it.

Then do not indulge in studied gesticulation. I have seen young gents when they were delivering a memorized speech, coming to a place where they thought they ought to make a gesture, (Here the speaker stiffly brought his right hand to the center of his body, raised it very precisely along the median line of the body to about the height of the chin, then pushed it slowly off in a direction to the right, forward, and upward, closely following the whole movement with his eyes.). (Great laughter). That smells of the looking-glass, and is – I was going to say, very disgusting to an intelligent hearer.

Then, do not indulge in violent gesticulation. How often you see a man – (Here the speaker went through with several rounds of the pugilistic demonstrations often seen in the pulpit and on the platform) – or with his bible – (Here the speaker illustrated the violent and nervous handling of the Bible). Now that does not mean anything. I saw during our Educational Congress here, a man using this kind of gesticulation (Illustrates). He kept that up for half an hour. And what did it mean? Was he aiming to drive home some thought? I could not see it.

Then do not indulge in anything like laziness. Do not lean on the pulpit this way (Illustrates) or this way (Illustrates). I was very much surprised when I was teaching Homiletics, before Prof. Jefferson came, to find that though the author of our text book specified such faults as lying on the pulpit, when I heard him preach afterwards, this is what he did (Illustrates by lying on the pulpit.) (Much laughter). That looks as if you were lazy – as if you had not gotten stirred up any by the thoughts you are uttering to stir up others.

I close with this. If you went to see gesticulation in as near perfection as you will ever see it, watch little children three or four years of age, engaged in animated conversation. And if you do any imitating, imitate them rather than full grown men.