

## **The Origin of the Three-Point Sermon**

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*So Pastor, What's Your Point?* discusses this definition for preaching: *Preaching is God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—communicating His truth in our world to people in the pew through human instruments in order to change their thinking, bridle their emotions, and alter their wills for the purpose of converting sinners, sanctifying saints, and preparing people for heaven.*<sup>1</sup> Each preaching event communicates the truth distilled from a text of Scripture. This distilled truth is the exegetical point of the text. It is the truth of God. Good preaching applies the truth of God, the point of the text, to the congregation. Good preaching therefore focuses around one main point we call the homiletical point or the preaching point. This preaching point, derived as it is from the text, guides the preacher in unfolding the text for the congregation and applying the truth of the text to the congregation. As the preacher declares God's truth derived from Scripture under the power and anointing of the Holy Spirit, God Himself communicates His truth to the people in the congregation.

The majority of those who teach homiletics insist that preaching must center on one main point derived from the preacher's text. J. H. Jowett's statement may be the most often quoted,

I have the conviction that no sermon is ready for preaching ... until we can express its theme in a short, pregnant sentence as clear as crystal. I find the getting of that sentence is the hardest, the most exacting and the most fruitful labor in my study ... I do not think a sermon ought to be preached, or even written, until the sentence has emerged, clear and lucid as a cloudless moon....<sup>2</sup>

A personal favorite is a statement by W.G.T. Shedd,

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis J. Prutow, *So Pastor, What's Your Point* (Philadelphia: Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, 2010), 27-34.

<sup>2</sup> J. H. Jowett, *The Preacher, His Life and Work* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1912), 133.

He [the pastor] must aim to pervade it [the sermon] with but one leading idea, to embody in it but one doctrine, and to make it teach but one lesson.... The importance of this maxim may best be seen by considering the fact, that sermons are more defective in unity of structure, and a constant progress toward a single end, than in any other respect.<sup>3</sup>

With such emphasis on one main point, what about three-point sermons? After all, the three-point sermon is standard fare in evangelical circles. It has been so prevalent for so many years that it has taken on an almost sacrosanct position in pulpits across the church. What then is the origin of the three-point sermon? When did the three-point sermon come into vogue? To answer these questions, we take a brief excursion into the history of preaching. This will help us evaluate the standard three-point sermon compared to the procedure I am suggesting for sermon preparation and preaching.<sup>4</sup>

It is certainly true that the three-point sermon can be and often is quite helpful and edifying. It has been used profitably for a very long time. The three-point sermon may indeed be a path to good preaching. However, as I tell my students, I am not interested in you being good preachers. Being a good preacher is not enough. The church needs excellent preachers and I want you to be excellent preachers. This is the motive behind the sermon preparation procedure I present in *So Pastor, What's Your Point?*

One of the arguments for a three-point structure is that distinct divisions within a sermon are helpful for those listening. "In order to keep us to our plan, and to help our hearers see what it is, a sermon should have distinct divisions.... Divisions, or headings, make a sermon easy to follow.... Sermons without divisions are likely to dehumanize people."<sup>5</sup> Men and women are

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<sup>3</sup>W.G.T. Shedd, *Homiletics and Pastoral Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1867), 147.

<sup>4</sup>Chapter 10 of *So Pastor, What's Your Point?* provides the bulk of the material for this paper and is used by permission.

<sup>5</sup>Stuart Olyott, *Preaching Pure and Simple* (Bryntirion: Wales, 2005), 81.

created in God's image, and although this image is marred, it still exists. "The human mind does not take kindly to disorder and chaos."<sup>6</sup> Hence the need for distinct divisions.

However, there is no biblical precedent for consistently using a three-point structure in preaching. Examine the Sermon on the Mount. Examine the sermons of Peter in Acts 2 and 3. Examine the messages of Paul in Acts 13, 17, and 20. Examine Stephen's sermon in Acts 7. You do not find distinct divisions of the kind suggested above. None of these sermons have distinct points. None of them have *three* distinct points. Where it is so obvious to contemporary preachers that three points is a standard and helpful for the people, it seems that it is not so obvious to Jesus, Peter, Stephen, or Paul. You can examine Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the other prophets to the same end. The preachers in Scripture did not view sermons without distinct divisions as dehumanizing.

Quite to the contrary, you can argue for the episodic structure of biblical sermons without defined divisions.<sup>7</sup> Review Stephen's sermon in Acts 7. Stephen announces no points. At the same time, the episodic nature of the presentation is evident. Stephen introduces Abraham (verse 2-7), transitions with words about the twelve patriarchs (verse 8), and moves on to Joseph (verses 9-16). Having set the stage, Stephen then moves to the first forty years of the life of Moses (verses 17-28). He transitions with brief notice of the second forty years of Moses (verse 29), and he addresses the third forty years of Moses (verses 30-43). Stephen then turns his attention to the tabernacle and temple (verses 44-50). He finally ends with a strong conclusion. There are at least five episodes in Stephen's presentation rehearsed without announcing his divisions.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Chapter 7 of *So Pastor, What's Your Point?* urges the serious consideration of the episodic nature of oral communication when preparing to preach. See especially pages 73-74.

The Book of Hebrews is a “word of exhortation” (Hebrews 13:23), and likely a sermon. In Acts 13:14, the leaders of the Synagogue in Pisidian Antioch invite Paul to give a “word of exhortation” to the people. “The expression ‘a word of exhortation’ (Gk. λόγος παρακλήσεως) was perhaps a synagogue term for the sermon which followed the Scripture readings (cf. Heb. 13:22).”<sup>8</sup> William Lane says this expression is “an idiomatic designation for the homily or edifying discourse that followed the public reading from the designated portions of Scripture....”<sup>9</sup> The writer to the Hebrews does not use distinct divisions as we think of them. He does not use three distinct points in his synagogue-type message.

Again, Acts 13:14-15 outlines the general procedure of the synagogue:

But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they [Paul and Barnabas] went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, “Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it.”

F. F. Bruce describes the scene:

After the appropriate prayers had been recited and the two scripture lessons read—one from the Pentateuch and the other from some place in the prophetic books bearing some relation to the subject of the Pentateuchal reading—an address was normally delivered by some suitable member of the congregation. It was part of the duties of the “rulers of the synagogue” to appoint someone to deliver the address. On this occasion they sent to the two strangers who had come to their city synagogue, inviting them to speak a word of exhortation to the gathering.<sup>10</sup>

Bruce adds, “At this time the Pentateuch was read in the synagogue according to a triennial lectionary, the 154 or 155 lessons still being marked in Hebrew Bibles as the *Sedarim*.”<sup>11</sup> We

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<sup>8</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 268, n. 24.

<sup>9</sup> William Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hebrews 9-13* (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 568.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, 267-268.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 267, n. 22.

therefore see the synagogue procedure to be the reading of Scripture followed by an exhortation, teaching, or sermon. When we examine Luke, we find Christ followed the same procedure.

And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read. And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place.... And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them... (Luke 4:16-21).

Commenting on this text, John Lightfoot, a Westminster Divine, says, “*Moses and the Prophets* were read in their Synagogues every Sabbath day, Acts 13.15 & 15.21.”<sup>12</sup> Continuing his commentary, Lightfoot describes the procedure as follows.

The reader of the *Hapthoroth* or portion out of the Prophets, was ordinarily one of the number of those that had read the Law: he was called out to read by the Minister of the Congregation, he went up into the desk, had the book of the Prophet given him, began with Prayer, and had an interpreter, even as it was with them that read the Law.

And under these Synagogue rulers are we to understand Christ[']s reading in the Synagogue at this time: namely, as a member of the Synagogue, called out by the Minister, reading according to the accustomed order, the portion in the Prophet when the Law was read (and it is like[ly] he had read some part of the Law before) and having an Interpreter by him to render into *Syriack* the Text he read: he then begins in *Syriack* to preach upon it.<sup>13</sup>

Hughes Oliphant Old comments on the procedure Jesus uses in the synagogue. “The lesson from the prophets was to be chosen by the preacher. By means of this lesson, the preacher opened up the passage that had been read from the Law earlier in the service. The Principle that Scripture is to interpret Scripture was already well established.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> John Lightfoot, *The Works of the Reverend and Learned John Lightfoot* (London: Robert Scot, 1684), 2: 614.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 615.

<sup>14</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and the Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, Volume 1, The Biblical Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 102.

We see two important things here. *First*, the burden of the synagogue message was to expound the Law of Moses from the perspective of the Prophets. In other words, the preacher looked at the Law through the eyes of the Prophet and thus applied the Law to the synagogue congregation. We do something similar today. We often have an Old Testament Scripture reading and then a New Testament reading. The pastor expounds the Old Testament from the perspective of the New Testament. He looks at the Old Testament through the eyes of the New Testament and thus applies the Old Testament to the congregation.

*Second*, since the readings from the Law followed a prescribed lectionary requiring a full rehearsal of the Law every two to three years, the preaching in the synagogue followed a *lectio continua* method. “The preaching of the synagogue had as its aim the interpretation and application of the lessons read in worship.... It was supposed to teach, admonish, inspire, and comfort the congregation.”<sup>15</sup> This regular interpretation and application of Scripture is what we understand to be expository preaching. Referring to Christ preaching in the synagogue at Nazareth, Leroy Nixon suggests, “Christian expository preaching may properly be said to have begun with our Lord Jesus Christ Himself.”<sup>16</sup> He also points to Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian as an “example of expository preaching.”<sup>17</sup>

Two early church fathers, Augustine (354-430) and Chrysostom (ca. 347-407), are well known for their expository preaching. “In his homiletical work, Augustine gave first priority to expository preaching.”<sup>18</sup> For Augustine, “A sermon is first of all an exposition of Scripture.”<sup>19</sup> As

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

<sup>16</sup> Leroy Nixon, *John Calvin, Expository Preacher* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 13.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>18</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, Volume 2, The Patristic Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 345.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 349.

for Chrysostom, “First of all, he was an expository preacher, leaving us extensive series of sermons on many books of the Old and New Testaments.... In principle, [Chrysostom] preached the *lectio continua*, beginning each sermon where he had left off before.”<sup>20</sup> “He took up whole books and explained them in order, instead of confining himself to particular texts....”<sup>21</sup> As a result, “[N]early all his sermons on Scripture texts are more or less expository.”<sup>22</sup> Broadus says, “Chrysostom is undoubtedly the prince of expository preachers.”<sup>23</sup>

Another facet of the preaching of Augustine and Chrysostom was its extemporaneous nature. “Augustine was not so much concerned with producing great human literature as he was with the exposition of the Word of God.”<sup>24</sup> Chrysostom’s procedure was as follows:

John studied the text beforehand and prepared his remarks but did not write out his sermons before preaching them. As was the custom in classical oratory, he went before the people with his mind prepared to engage his listeners and to bring out his thoughts in a lively exchange with those who were before him. A stenographer took down the sermon as it was delivered, and afterward, the preacher would finish up the text for publication.<sup>25</sup>

It is of no small consequence that Calvin’s preaching followed that path paved by Augustine and Chrysostom. Robert Godfrey observes,

Calvin was probably drawn to verse-by-verse exposition of the text for a variety of reasons. He apparently believed that such an approach would most clearly demonstrate that the preached Word was the same as the inscripturated Word. Calvin may well have been drawn to this approach by some of the greatest ancient preachers such as Augustine and John Chrysostom.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>21</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Volume III, Nicene and Post Nicene Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 939.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> John A. Broadus, *Lectures on the History of Preaching* (New York, A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1907), 79.

<sup>24</sup> Old, *The Patristic Age*, 345.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 173-174.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Godfrey, Forward to *Sermons on Galatians by John Calvin* (Audubon: Old Paths, 1995), ix.

James Montgomery Boice also links Calvin with Augustine and Chrysostom rather than the medieval Schoolmen.

Sequential exposition was not a new approach to preaching invented by Calvin. It had been made popular in the fourth and fifth centuries, especially in the sermons of John Chrysostom and Saint Augustine. And although that style of preaching had been lost during the Middle Ages—few priests knew the Bible well enough to do it—it was the common pattern of teaching in the theological schools.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, the Scholastics did not follow Augustine or Chrysostom in their preaching.

However, the theological schools taught Scripture verse by verse. Calvin embraced the preaching of both Augustine and Chrysostom and the expository method in the medieval schools. T. H. L.

Parker explains that “expository preaching”

...was practiced especially in the fourth and fifth centuries. It consisted of expounding whole books of the Bible, passage by passage. Thus Chrysostom preached through most of the books of the New Testament and his younger contemporary Augustine expounded the Psalms and the Fourth Gospel. Although in the four or five centuries preceding the Reformation the Bible was far from absent from preaching..., the broad scope of connected series largely dropped out. It was however, continued in the class-room of the theological faculties, where verse by verse exposition of complete books was the regular method. When Calvin, therefore, embarked on this course ... he was taking up the tradition of the later Fathers and the medieval theological training.<sup>28</sup>

It appears that this “medieval theological training” was not that of the Scholastics.

Calvin did begin his theological studies in Paris. “Paris was the capital of Scholasticism, and Scholasticism was now being challenged as never before. At the Collège de Montague, famous as a citadel of theological orthodoxy and rigorous piety, Calvin learned the old theology.”<sup>29</sup> After obtaining a bachelor’s degree, Calvin’s father directed him into the study of law. “His father

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<sup>27</sup> James M. Boice, Forward to *Sermons on Psalm 119 by John Calvin* (Audubon: Old Paths, 1996), ix.

<sup>28</sup> Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 80.

<sup>29</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Church, Volume 4, The Age of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 91.



may or may not have realized that he was pulling his son out of the old learning and planting him in the new learning.... Calvin studied law at both Orléans and at Bourges, where the new learning of the Renaissance was being taught.”<sup>30</sup> His professors “introduced him to the historical-critical method of studying the law.”<sup>31</sup> After the death of his father, Calvin “returned to Paris and entered the newly founded Collège de France, where, under royal patronage, the new learning held sway.”<sup>32</sup> He continued studies in Greek and Hebrew under men who “were far and away the leading scholars in their field.”<sup>33</sup> It is these schools of the “new learning” to which both Boice and Parker appear to point and not the Scholastic academies. “Calvin broke off in an absolute manner from the traditional and scholastic method of his predecessors.”<sup>34</sup>

Since Calvin and the other Reformers pass over the Scholastic model for preaching in favor of the expository procedure of Chrysostom and Augustine, what is the Scholastic procedure they reject? Let’s begin with the basic approach of the Schoolmen to their study. “The leading peculiarities of Scholasticism are that it subjected the reason to church authority and sought to prove the dogmas of the Church independently by dialectics.”<sup>35</sup> Among the Scholastics, the use of dialectics “reached its acme in the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas in which he stated an opinion of a Father, then gave a counter opinion, and then gave the reconciling exposition of the problem.”<sup>36</sup> This “threefold method of treatment is pursued throughout.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 91-92.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Nixon, 71.

<sup>35</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Volume V, The Middle Ages* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 588.

<sup>36</sup> *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 165.

<sup>37</sup> Schaff, *The Middle Ages*, 665.

In the preaching of Thomas Aquinas and the other Scholastics, we have “the *Summa Theologica* in pulpit form.”<sup>38</sup> As Old therefore indicates, “Typical of Scholastic preaching is the three-point sermon.”<sup>39</sup> And again, “[N]othing is more characteristic of the Scholastic sermon than an outline that divides the subject up into points, subpoints, and sub-subpoints....”<sup>40</sup> In addition, “Tacking down each point with a quotation of Scripture is typical of Scholastic preaching.”<sup>41</sup> If there were only three references given in the sermon, this would not present a problem. But as the following sample outline indicates, the practice was to give references for the subpoints and the sub-subpoints.

Edwin Dargan gives the following sample outline of a sermon from Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), the premier Schoolman.<sup>42</sup>

*Coming of the King.* Matt. 21:5. First Sunday in Advent

I. The Dignity of Him Who Comes.

- (1) A Merciful King—in sparing. Isa. 16:5.
- (2) A Just King—in Judging. Isa. 34; 16:5.
- (3) A Good King—in Rewarding.
- (4) A Wise King—in Governing. Ps. 73:1.
- (5) A Terrible King. Jer. 23:5.
- (6) An Omnipotent King. Est. [Apoc.] 13:9.
- (7) An Eternal King. Jer. 10:10; Luke 1:13.

II. The Utility of His Coming. Sevenfold;

- (1) For the Illumination of the World. Joh. 8:12; 1:9.
- (2) For the Spoilation of Hell. Hos. 13:14; Zech 9:11.
- (3) For the Reparation of Heaven. Eph. 1:10.
- (4) For the Destruction of Sin. Heb. 2:14, 15.
- (5) For the Vanquishing of the Devil. Rom. 6:6.

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<sup>38</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Church, Volume 3, The Medieval Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 409.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 394.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>42</sup> Edwin Charles Dargan, *A History of Preaching, Volume I, From the Apostolic Fathers to the Great Reformers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), 241-242. Dargan has the outline in three paragraphs rather than in the outline form shown.

(6) For the Reconciliation of man with God. Rom. 5:10.

(7) For the Beatification of man. Joh. 3:16.

III. The Manner of His Coming. In Meekness, for four reasons:

(1) That he might more easily correct the wicked. Ps. 89:10 [Vulg.].

(2) That he might show to all his lowliness. Ecclus. [Apoc.] 3:19.

(3) That he might draw the sheep to himself, and multiply himself to the people. 2 Sam. 22:36. [And a quotation from Bernard].

(4) That he might teach meekness. Matt. 11:29. So four things should commend meekness to us:

(a) Deliver us from evil;

(b) Perfect grace, Prov. 3:34;

(c) Preserve the soul, Ecclus. [Apoc.] 12:31;

(d) Deserves the land of the living, Matt. 5:5.

“The text is developed with an impressive collection of quotations from both biblical and patristic authorities. This was typical of the best Scholastic preaching: it was in quoting authorities that one made one’s point.”<sup>43</sup> In this matter of divisions and subdivisions, “there is a noticeable difference, however, between patristic preaching and medieval preaching.”<sup>44</sup> Needless to say, the latter uses a rather complex outline. And as we have seen, this type of outline is also in essence a teaching outline rather than a preaching outline.<sup>45</sup> Counting all the headings, it has twenty-five points. It is an all too typical approach to preaching today.

In my experience teaching homiletics, some students buy into my Sermon Preparation Procedure and the more thorough exposition of Scripture.<sup>46</sup> Others humor me in class, but then revert to the three-point style. They often attempt to draw others to adopt their practice. Their sermons announce three-points, are generally more topical in nature, use a large number of biblical references and frequent commentary quotes to bolster their positions, and have a lecture style. They smack of Scholasticism. I say this to acknowledge that the Medieval-Reformed

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 463.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 312.

<sup>45</sup> Jay Adams, *Truth Applied* (Stanley, NC: Timeless Texts, 1990), 85-91. Prutow, *So Pastor*, 62-63.

<sup>46</sup> The Sermon Preparation Procedure emphasizes exposition and application using a sequential outline based upon the episodic nature of oral communication.

tension in preaching is indeed present with us today whether we realize it or not. John Broadus notes the continuing affect of Scholasticism on our preaching:

[T]he great Schoolmen of the Middle Ages, applying the most minute logical analysis to all subjects of philosophy and religion, established a fashion which was soon followed in preaching also. The young preachers, being trained by the books they read and by the oral teaching at the universities to nothing else than this minute analytical discussion, made the mistake, too often made still, of carrying the lecture-room methods into the pulpit. Analysis became the rage. Scarcely anything was thought of but clear divisions and logical concatenations, and to this was to a great extent sacrificed all oratorical movement and artistic harmony. Too much of the preaching of all the modern centuries has been marred by this fault. Analytical exposition of topics and elaborate argumentation have been the great concern to the neglect of *simplicity* and *naturalness*, of *animated movement* and *power*. Preachers, especially the educated, have too often regarded instruction and conviction as the aim of their labors, when *they are but means of leading men to the corresponding feeling, determination, and action*. And the custom being thus established, it has been followed, simply because it was the custom....<sup>47</sup>

We learn three things from this short study. *First*, the three-point sermon, “a new thing in the history of preaching, came from applying to practical discourse the methods pursued in the Universities.”<sup>48</sup> It is a Scholastic innovation. *Second*, the Reformers such as Calvin clearly rejected this approach to preaching in favor of the simple verse-by-verse exposition of Scripture practiced by Chrysostom and Augustine. There is a *third* matter this discussion brings to the fore. Whether we like it or not, we too are caught in the tension between the Scholastics and the Reformers. We likely fall on one side or the other, and interestingly enough, a large percentage of us, perhaps the bulk of us, fall on the side of the Scholastics.

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<sup>47</sup> Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, Revised by J. B. Weatherspoon (New York: Harper and Row, 1944), 111. Emphasis added.

<sup>48</sup> Broadus, *Lectures on the History of Preaching*, 108.