

Introduction

A pastor must focus on God, the Bible, and the congregation. He must have a close, personal relationship with God, based on obedience and faith, before he can share that relationship with others. He must also have a deep understanding of the Bible before he can explain God's message to others, and he must have the respect and trust of the congregation before he can motivate them to respond to God's word.

A pastor must draw on a wide variety of skills to be effective. He functions as an interpreter, advisor, and teacher. As he moves back and forth between the biblical text and the modern world. He employs skills in hermeneutics, counseling, and speech communication to develop a message that is engaging, relevant and effective, but pastors are not equally careful or successful in this task.

A pastor can consistently produce a compelling and biblically sound message using a disciplined and methodical approach. Professor Wayne McDill says that preaching is a skill, and like all other skills, it can be developed and maintained through conscious and sustained effort in each of its several facets.¹ The process of biblical preaching includes selecting a text, studying the text, developing proper applications, organizing the sermon, and preparing for sermon delivery. The purpose of this article is to describe the five steps of effective sermon preparation.

Selecting the Text

The first step in sermon preparation is to select a passage for further study. Dr. John Broadus once said, "If the preacher is to speak for God, he must go where God has spoken. A pastor does not create his basic message; it has been given to him. His task is to interpret, to illustrate, to apply."² However, a pastor must keep two important goals in mind when selecting a text.

First, there must be enough material to fill the time allotted. A single verse can be covered relatively quickly, allowing one to join several related verses into a topical sermon. A few paragraphs will often contain enough material on a single subject to create a cohesive message. However, the life of David would span several chapters and contain too much material for a single sermon. It would be better to break this material up into a series of sermons.

Second, the material must meet the spiritual needs of the congregation. Communicating God's truth should be an act of loving service, and a pastor must know the questions and problems facing the congregation to serve both them and God. Dr. Broadus also said, "Let the needs of the congregation determine the choice of the texts."³

Studying the Text

The second step in sermon preparation is to study the text. There is a great danger at this stage of the process; as Dr. Walt Russell once warned, "Focusing on the felt needs of listeners makes it easy to end up with a great felt need desperately in search of a passage.... We are constantly tempted to skip the hard work of determining a biblical text's meaning and move

¹ Wayne McDill, *12 Essential Skills for Great Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 2-4.

² John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: Harper Collins, 1979), 316.

³ *Ibid.*, 34.

quickly to its relevance to us.... [But this] increases our chances of emerging with wrong meaning, wrong emphasis, and wrong application.”⁴

The goal of studying the text is to understand the original meaning of the passage for the original audience. This is best accomplished through inductive Bible study. This means conducting a grammatical, historical, cultural, and literary investigation of the text before turning to various theological resources. Although it is tempting to resort to commentaries early in the study, one may be unduly influenced by the views of others.

A systematic, inductive study allows one to examine all the pertinent background material before considering the opinions of others. This also helps to uncover insights that might otherwise be missed. The process of discovery is more personal, more deeply ingrained, and thus, more easily recalled during sermon delivery.

An inductive study begins with a review of the material that precedes and follows the text. The larger the passage, the greater the amount of surrounding material that one should read until the immediate literary context becomes clear. Writing a brief outline of this material also helps to capture the author’s literary development.

This is followed by a detailed, grammatical analysis of the text. Those who can work in the original languages will probably prefer to do so, but a comparison of several modern translations is usually sufficient to establish the semantic range of the translated words and to expose significant textual variants. Literal translations such as the English Standard Version or the New American Standard Bible provide a good starting point. If a significant textual variant is involved, a pastor should review all the evidence to determine the most likely reading.

Grammatical analysis also includes a consideration of semantics and syntax. Sentence diagramming is useful for understanding complex arguments or convoluted sentence structures because it breaks the text down into constituent parts for easier analysis. A pastor should also explore keywords, repetitive phrases, and native idioms. Lexicons, concordances, and word studies provide a basic starting point. For more advanced study, an interlinear translation coupled with a textbook on biblical Hebrew or Greek grammar can also be helpful.

Historical analysis is also important. This includes a review of biographical information about the author and the original audience, important geographical locations and political boundaries, as well as the date of composition and significant events that occurred around that time.

Bible handbooks, dictionaries, and atlases can provide valuable background material. For example, Jesus resurrected the only son of a widow near the place where Elisha resurrected the only son of the Shunammite woman (Lk 7:11ff, 2 Kgs 4:18ff). This may explain why the people of that region believed that Jesus was one of the prophets of old (Lk 9:18-19).

Cultural analysis would include religious, economic, and social factors. Simple items like the value of coins, methods of taxation, educational background, marriage customs, and the legal rights of various social classes help illuminate the text. Specific works on these topics as well as primary sources from the period, such as the writings of Philo or Josephus, can add additional insight.

Literary analysis examines the genre of the passage and the rhetorical goals of the author. Narrative, poetry, proverbs, parables, allegories, analogies, prophecy, and apocalyptic literature have distinct rules for interpretation. A pastor must know how to recognize and interpret each of these forms. Distinguishing between literal and figurative language is crucial to understanding.

⁴ Walt Russell, “What It Means to Me,” *Christianity Today*, 26 October 1992, 33.

While didactic passages are generally clear as to rhetorical intent, narratives may contain subtle clues in the form of value judgments or commentary about certain persons or deeds.

Finally, a pastor must consider theological issues. The guiding principle is the “analogy of Scripture.” Professor Grant Osborne warned that “doctrines should not be built on a single passage but rather should summarize all that Scripture says on that topic.”⁵ In addition to various commentaries, a pastor should consider the contributions of biblical, historical, and systematic theology.

Developing Proper Applications

The next step is to develop proper applications. Dr. Roy Zuck said, “Effective preaching and teaching has as its objective the changing of lives and the alteration of undesirable attitudes and behavior into desirable ones. This calls for proper attention to application.”⁶

The goal of developing proper applications is to generate concrete and specific suggestions on how to live by God’s truth in today’s world. A pastor must compare the situation of the original audience with that of the modern audience and determine if the two situations are substantially similar. If so, he must seek out a timeless principle in the text upon which to base appropriate applications for today’s audience and then practice that application before giving the sermon.

Professor Zuck also said, “Principles... serve as bridges between interpretation and application. Latent in the text, they summarize the essence of a Bible passage in terms that are applicable to a broad spectrum of readers and situations.... The principlizing bridge spans the gulf between the past and the present, with a truth that is relevant to both.”⁷ He illustrated the bridge between interpretation and application in the following way:

Determine the <i>meaning</i> of the passage to its original audience.	Write out the <i>principle</i> .	Decide on a specific <i>action/response</i> .
<i>Interpretation</i> (Meaning)		<i>Application</i> (Significance)

For a sermon to be effective, the principle of the text must be relevant to the needs of the audience. If not, their attention will wander.

Similarly, the application must be appropriate for the modern audience. Biblical commands or admonitions are often limited to a particular time, individual, or culture, while the principles behind them are not. For example, Paul’s admonition to avoid meat sacrificed to idols was based on the principle of avoiding the appearance of evil lest a weaker brother stumbles (1 Corinthians 8). While idol worship and sacrificial meat are less of an issue today, avoiding the appearance of evil is not.

Applications must also be verified by personal experience. Preaching is fundamentally an act of leadership, and the best way to illustrate an application is to live it. As Haddon Robinson once said, “A preacher must learn to listen to God before he speaks for Him.”⁸ This will strengthen the conviction that the application is practical and correct.

⁵ Grant R. Osborn, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 11.

⁶ Roy B. Zuck, *Walvoord: A Tribute*, (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 24-25

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26-27

⁸ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980), 26.

Organizing the Sermon

The next step is to organize the information into a clear and compelling message. During sermon development, there is a shift from logical analysis to creative expression. The human mind has a natural capacity for organization and creativity, but it takes time to meditate and distill the information into an understandable presentation.

The goal of organizing the sermon is to produce an outline that will guide a pastor during sermon delivery. While some pastors can speak without notes, most need to know where they are going and how they intend to get there. An outline serves as an organizing tool, a roadmap, and a cue card.

Ideally, an outline should be no more than three levels of indentation with the introduction, body, and conclusion at the top level. Usually, it progresses from Roman numerals to capital letters and then to Arabic numerals. Every level should have at least two entities (in other words, a “B” for every “A” and a “2” for every “1”).

The outline must capture the results of prior studies and articulate them in terms that everyone can understand. The sermon must accurately interpret the biblical text, clearly communicate one biblical principle, provide valid and relevant applications of that principle, and then, persuade the audience to act.

The first task is to write out the thesis statement. A sermon must have a single message. While studying the text, a pastor’s mind will be exposed to numerous interesting facts and useful principles. It may be tempting to include everything in the sermon, but the message would become cluttered and irrelevant.

The thesis statement is a short, clear, specific, and declarative sentence that captures the essence of the sermon. It tells the audience in no uncertain terms what the sermon is going to tell them. This helps focus the scope of the sermon.

The thesis statement serves as a filter; any information not related to the thesis statement must be trimmed away from the outline. This promotes unity and cohesion.

The thesis statement serves as a transition sentence between the introduction and the body. Everything in the introduction should lead up to it, and everything in the body and conclusion must relate to it.

The next task is to organize the body. Professor McDill taught that there are four basic ways to elaborate ideas in normal conversation: explanation, illustration, argumentation, and application.⁹ Some of the first three may be used to support the intended applications. A pastor can explain a concept, tell a story or build an argument to support the applications that follow. The biblical text often provides much of this already.

The main points within the body must be stated with crystal clarity, arranged in a logical sequence, and consistent with the theme statement. Numbering the main points provides the audience with a clear frame of reference and is a useful memory aid. If the main points have been arranged logically, transitions should be smooth and natural.

Each point must be carefully developed. Information must be factual and verifiable. Illustrations must be vivid and helpful. Arguments must be logical and persuasive. Analogies must be based on the similarities between the two situations.

The next task is to organize the conclusion. The purpose of the conclusion is to bring the sermon to a natural climax. It is an excellent place to summarize the main points of the sermon, but it should not introduce any new material. Here, the force of logic is combined with the power

⁹ McDill, 181.

of emotion to motivate the audience to act. Typically, the conclusion should be about twenty percent of the sermon.

The last task is to organize the introduction. The purpose of the introduction is to grab the audience's attention and arouse interest in the subject. As Haddon Robinson once said, "If the preacher does not capture attention in the first thirty seconds, he may never gain it at all."¹⁰ A pastor can exploit humor, suspense, surprise, or curiosity to gain a foothold, but care must be taken to avoid becoming melodramatic, lurid, or farcical. The key is to connect the subject of the sermon with the basic needs of the audience. No matter where the introduction begins, it should move directly toward the theme statement and end there. Typically, the introduction should be no more than ten percent of the sermon.

The introduction, body, and conclusion should follow the adage: "Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you've told them." By the end of the sermon, the thesis statement should be driven home like a nail driven into a board.

Preparing for Sermon Delivery

The last step is to prepare for sermon delivery. A pastor must speak clearly if his audience is to understand him. As Paul said, in 1 Corinthians 14:8-9, "Again, if the trumpet sounds a muffled call, who will prepare for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air" (ESV).

The goal of practicing sermon delivery is to hone the ability to communicate the message. Practicing a sermon several times beforehand will allow a pastor to rehearse various phrasings, so they flow smoothly when needed.

The mechanics of public speaking are essential. Good eye contact helps people feel that they are being addressed personally; relying too heavily on notes disrupts eye contact and is another reason for practicing sermon delivery. Good posture and grooming help eliminate potential visual distractions. Gestures must be spontaneous and natural.

The qualities of the voice are crucial. A pastor must have sufficient volume to reach the back of the hall and then maintain that level throughout. The emotion of the moment may cause the pitch to rise and the pace of delivery to quicken; taking a deep breath will ease tension and slow the pace of delivery. There also must be enough vocal variety to avoid a monotone delivery.

Finally, a pastor must have a method for personal feedback. While a video recording is brutally honest in capturing a pastor's delivery, only a spouse or trusted friend can provide an objective, human reaction. Value judgments about the use of humor or the suitability of certain material must come from an external source. Habitual weaknesses in delivery must be targeted and overcome.

Conclusion

Sermon preparation is a five-step process that includes selecting a text, studying the text, developing proper applications, organizing the sermon, and preparing for sermon delivery. A pastor begins by selecting a text that relates to the spiritual needs of the audience. A careful study uncovers the timeless principles contained in that text. If a principle is relevant to the audience, a pastor must develop appropriate applications based on that principle and then verify them by

¹⁰ Robinson, 160.

personal experience. The material is then organized into a clear and logical outline that everyone can understand. Finally, a pastor must rehearse the sermon to prepare his delivery.

Giving a sermon is a serious responsibility and a valuable service. It requires the development and use of a broad variety of skills in a systematic and disciplined fashion to insure the best possible outcome. Although it requires considerable effort to develop good preaching skills, there can be no higher calling than helping other people to establish a sound, personal relationship with their Creator.

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