

How to Evaluate a Sermon

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Introduction

Before we begin evaluating a sermon, we need to ask several questions about ourselves.

Firstly, why are we listening to *this* speaker? Do we listen to them because we like what they say? Are we listening to try to catch them out? Are we listening to them simply because that's who is speaking today? These things are as likely to influence us and the way we receive their words as the words they actually use.

If we listen because that preacher makes us feel good about ourselves, or never challenges us, we cannot expect to grow and mature spiritually, for recognising the wrong in our own lives is part of that process. ^[1]

Listening to try to catch the preacher out leads us to lose concentration on what God may be saying. It also leads to the possibility of us becoming hyper-critical, with all that implies.

The first recorded New Testament sermon was Peter using the prophecies of Joel to explain the events of Pentecost to an amazed crowd (Acts 2). The Believers later met together in the Temple courts to listen to the apostles' teaching.

Scholars tell us that most sermons in the following formative years of the Church were similar public readings of Scripture, with exposition and commentary of what that meant, and how they could apply it in their lives.

We also need to be prepared to listen in order to hear what God is saying to His Church, and to us as members of that Church.

That said, we are entreated within scripture itself to keep a high view of scripture, and to be wary of those who twist it or use it to further their own agenda.^[2]

We do well to remember that just because someone quotes scripture, doesn't mean they are teaching Biblical truth; even Satan quoted scripture to Jesus.

1Ti 4:1 ESV

1) Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons,

1Jn 4:1 ESV

1) Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

The answer to this in New Testament times is famously found in Acts 17.

Act 17:11 ESV

11) Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

Two things stand out about the Bereans- they were eager to hear the Gospel given by Paul and Silas, and they examined the scriptures to see if what was being preached held up against scripture. For this reason, they were called “Noble.”

The word "*Examine*" in Greek (ἀνακρίνω : anakrino) means to 'investigate, appraise or judge something.' The Bereans certainly did not simply accept everything Paul or Silas said, and it is implied that they did not simply reject what was said either, but confirmed if scripture supported what was preached.

Here then is our quest: To live up to the name of the Noble Bereans.

The following is an adapted list of things to consider before the message begins, while the speaker is speaking, and for contemplation or discussion afterwards. Ultimately, the "Take Away," the things learned from the message are the most important, and should be considered carefully

1a. The Person

Knowing a little about the person speaking can tell us a lot. (You may know this from previous messages they have given)

For example:

1. Does this person's background pre-dispose them to a particular doctrinal bias?
2. Does the speaker separate the Holy Spirit from the Trinity? In their mind, does the Holy Spirit move independently to the Father and the Son? (Members of the Trinity always act as one).
3. Does the speaker overemphasise one aspect of Jesus' attributes over others? (i.e. Love without Justice?)
4. Is the speaker Autonomian - Are they "law unto themselves?" (Make things up as they go along/ not open to correction/ not recognising other authorities)
5. Is the speaker focussed on what you might think of them rather than appropriately speaking the Word of God?
6. Did they demonstrate adequate preparation, or was it off-the-cuff? (This is not always fair - circumstances may dictate that they might have had very little preparation time, however it may also demonstrate an over-reliance on their own public speaking skills.)

1b. The Setting

1. Be aware of your own biases. Do not allow issues such as where a person comes from, the way they dress or their accent etc distract you from the Word of God.
2. Don't judge by entertainment standards. (Is it all about being entertained, or about hearing from God?) This applies to both the music and the actual message.
3. Does it feel like a concert with a message added on the end? (This will show the priorities -see point 1 above)
4. Are there obvious signs of emotional manipulation?
5. Do the stories used point us to Christ, or do they simply make us empathise with the speaker or situation?
6. Does it address a particular issue, or does it ramble?
7. Is the topic relevant?

2a. The Message

1. The issue is never, “*Are they a prophet?*” – rather, it is “*Are they handling God's Word correctly?*” Do not simply accept things because of *who* said it – be Berean and check the scriptures. Do other scriptures agree with the text used?^[3]
2. Are quotes used in context? Is it in context with the Biblical author's intent?
3. Does the speaker re-define the Gospel? (Do they change what the Bible actually teaches about the *need* for salvation, the *means* of salvation, and *the purpose* of salvation?) Eph 2:8-9 cf Rom 3:21-31, Rom 5:8-10, 1Cor 15:1-11.
4. Does the speaker over-emphasise or de-emphasise certain aspects of the passage?
5. Are the definitions used Biblical, or has their usage or meaning been changed?
6. Does the speaker speak from scripture, or from another person? (Do they base their teaching on scripture, or on something they have been taught by someone else?)
7. Is the speaker making assumptions? If so, do they admit or point this out themselves? Do they base any further points on those assumptions?
8. Are statements or propositions backed up by scripture ?
9. Remember, God is not required to keep promises He never made. (Beware of people making promises on behalf of God i.e. artificial promises)

10. Is the sermon about feelings and emotions, or real issues, such as how you stand before God? (Remember feelings are temporary and subjective, and do not necessarily reflect reality)
11. Does the sermon lead to Christ?
12. Does the sermon lead to Christ for the right reasons? (Acknowledgement of sin, or wanting a better life?)
13. Does it address a particular issue, or does it ramble?
14. If the speaker is referring to patterns, types or shadows, do they adequately point to Biblical themes? (Patterns must be real patterns, not just a one-off occurrence. If it does point to something, can that thing be shown in scripture in plain language?)
15. Were there important questions left unaddressed?
16. Can the problem or issue spoken about be adequately defined by half-way through the message?

2b. The Take-Away

1. Do you *learn scripture* from this sermon? Was the message based on scripture?
 1. Was it based on a single passage or a single quote / verse?
2. Do you learn *what scripture means* from this sermon?
Was it adequately explained using other scriptures to explain this scripture?
3. Did it add to or change your understanding of anything?
4. Did it clear up your understanding of anything?
5. Was this sermon about Jesus, or the speaker? (“*What God has done*” or about “*What I have done for God*”?)
 1. Does the message leave you considering God's greatness, or Man's (Your) worth?
6. Could you adequately define the issues and answers by the end?
 1. Were they both (issue and answers) Biblical?
7. Will this message require that I change the way I see, understand, or relate to God? If so, how?
8. Was anything said or implied that you know is contrary to accepted doctrine or Scripture?
 1. Did any of the other points made rest on that suspect idea?
9. Did the application come from the text or something else?
10. If anyone else had strong feelings about the sermon, good or bad, why?

Acknowledgement

Much of this content is taken from and adapted from Regan Rose of *The Master's Seminary*, Chris Roseborough of *Pirate Christian Radio*, and Jeff Lacine of *9Marks*. This last one is available in full at <https://www.9marks.org/article/sermoncritique/>.

1. Hebrews 12:5-11; Hebrews 5:11-14 ↑
2. 2 Peter 3:15-16 ↑
3. Jeremiah 23:16; Jeremiah 29:8

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What are you looking for in a sermon?

Sermon preparation and delivery is an art. But it must have a purpose too. This short work will help us to examine ourselves and the message spoken for content, relevance and purpose, and most importantly, theological accuracy.

Acts 17:11 Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.