

HOW TO PREACH A SERMON

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HOW TO PREACH A SERMON

What do you speak about?

You must first get the passion. How do you find a subject you feel passionate enough to preach on?:

- Listen to what the community/society is thinking and feeling. Pick up on what's happening. What are the main sins, issues and concerns of your people today?
- Pray. What is God's passion for this moment? What is God wanting to say?
- Research this issue in the Bible. What clear instructions, commands and principles does it teach? Write these down in a catchy memorable way and let these become the main points of your sermon. This ensures that every sermon point is a "life application" point.
- Be careful of just following the lectionary (sharing a few thoughts on the set passage). Whilst following the lectionary may stop you preaching your favourite sermon many different ways, it also stops you seeking God for your people and discerning what is appropriate for them at this time. If you are seeking to grow a congregation in a particular area, it vital that you begin by teaching the values that undergird it. These will be the things you need to preach on. Preach strategically. If the lectionary is used, it should be used strategically e.g. to give holistic teaching on the life and teaching of Jesus.
- Sermons need to be revelation, not just information. Revelation requires you to run with God's agenda, an agenda designed to bring about transformation. However, revelation does not mean preaching your own whims and fancies, it means grounding what you say in the principles of God contained in Scripture.

What is the AIM of the sermon?

Sermons are not about information but transformation. Decide three things:

- 1) Decide in what way you want your people to be transformed. **WRITE THIS OUT FIRST.**
Write it out in a single sentence (using a strong verb), e.g. "To bring people to their knees in repentance over the recent divisions that have plagued the church".
- 2) Decide what you will say to tell them how to be transformed (The key points of the sermon).
WRITE THIS OUT SECOND
- 3) Decide what you will ask them to do to be transformed right now. **WRITE THIS OUT THIRD**

Decide whether you will preach an exegetical sermon or a topical sermon.

An exegetical sermon takes a passage of Scripture, explains its setting and expounds it so that its truths are distilled out and presented in a powerful and faithful way.¹ These types of sermons are particularly appreciated by congregations who are mostly committed Christians and by those familiar with church culture.

A topical sermon takes a subject relevant to the felt need of the people, e.g. "guidance" and applies a number of relevant passages from the Bible to give people understanding on that subject. Topical sermons work well with people who are not Christians and for people from non church backgrounds.

¹ Remember, the academic disciplines involved in exegesis should be like your underwear; you should wear it, but it shouldn't show (from J M Webb and R Kysar, *Greek for Preachers* (2002)).

No one should ever preach a sermon just to impart information. Every sermon must have a reason for it to be preached. Its goal is not information but transformation. As such, every sermon should end with a very clear challenge to respond or change in some way. As such, no sermon should be introduced as being an exposition on a certain passage of Scripture. Exegetical sermons should begin like topical sermons in defining the need God wants to address that is relevant for the moment. In other words, a well preached exegetical sermon should sound like a relevant topical sermon.

What should a sermon contain?

A sermon should contain:

- 1) An introduction
- 2) Main content
- 3) A conclusion and a call for a response

Introduction:

- 1) **The first sentence needs to compel people's attention.** Do not skimp on this. Craft it conscientiously, creatively and compellingly. Keep this sentence short.
- 2) **The first paragraph needs to make an emotional connection** with the people by establishing the relevance of what you say to their lives.

Note:

- i You may frame this with entertainment – but you must move beyond mere entertainment to relevance.
 - ii This is not a licence for emotional manipulation or for peddling emotionalism. Rather, we are talking about the importance of evoking emotional allegiance from people because you have established relevance.
- 3) Win trust
 - Be confident in manner.
 - Have good eye contact with people. Look for individual people and smile at them.
 - Adopt a friendly, natural and sincere manner
 - Remember that preaching is a RELATIONAL activity. Christianity is about authentic positive RELATIONSHIPS. The reason God created was to establish loving relationships with us. Everything that Christianity celebrates and teaches should therefore be done in a relational way. Great modern preachers seem to dialogue with their congregation when preaching, reaching them with winsome humour, movement, eye contact and questions. Do the same. Don't be afraid of using humour in your stories. If you tell stories against yourself, try and leave your family out of it, they will appreciate it.

The body of the sermon:

In the body of the sermon, have three clear points: each headed with a strong action word "be", "know", "do" etc. Make these headings clear and memorable rather than clever with contrived alliteration, e.g.

- Know the Father's plan
- Know the Son's example
- Know the Spirit's power

Search the passage/s of Scripture you are speaking about carefully and distil the essence of God's instruction to us. Then work hard at summarising these in three simple, memorable, action-charged headings.

The all important ending:

You have preached a sermon, but why have you preached it? You need to know what RESPONSE you are seeking from the people - then ask it of them. In doing this, you are seeking to co-operate with God as he seeks to disclose his will and purpose for his people.

The goal of preaching is transformation not information. Therefore, all sermons should end with some sort of concrete appeal. The appeal for response needs to be definite, and concrete. "Will you.....?" There must be something you call people to do in order to change right now. Invite people to come to the front for prayer. Invite people to put their hand up during prayer to be prayed for to accept Christ. Invite people to draw the shape of a cross on the floor with their toe, and, if they want to commit afresh to Jesus, to stand on that cross. If you cannot ask people to make a concrete commitment at the end of a sermon, it is a waste of an opportunity and you should not preach.

Other things to bear in mind when ending a sermon are:

- Don't fade away. Build up to the response you will ask of the people. You should build to a crescendo in emotion. Again, this is not peddling emotionalism, it simply understanding that people will not respond to anything that they are not convinced is important to you. Nor will they respond to anything that does not have a claim on their emotions.
- Do three things: 1) Sum up the main points (in a brutally clear, memorable way)
2) Tell people how to change
3) Tell people what concrete thing they can do to begin that change.
Don't introduce new material at this point.
- Be clear and specific in what you are calling people to in order to be transformed.

Use of sermon notes:

Do not read a sermon verbatim. If you do, it will be harder for you to have eye contact and "smile contact" with people. Read sermons also don't sound real because people write differently to how they speak. Sermons should be well prepared and researched but you will inevitably lose passion and engagement with your audience if you are tied strongly to your notes. For this reason, some ministers write their sermons out in full but then only take key notes or highlighted notes with them when they speak. I write my sermons out in full and highlight the key points. However, by the time I preach, I am so familiar with it that I hardly need to look at it. This also means that I am not forced to stand behind a pulpit and can engage with people more naturally.

Illustrations:

Make good use of stories and testimonies. People relate to them best. However, be discerning.

- Is your illustration clear?
- Is your illustration relevant? Only use those that help.
- Avoid illustrations that:
 - distract from your main theme
 - are there only for entertainment value
 - betray a confidence
 - may hurt the feelings of others

Stance:

- Stand naturally, evenly balanced on both feet.
- Don't hang on to the lectern as if it were a life raft.
- Don't necessarily feel tied to the lectern (P.A. permitting). People generally respond better if you stand before them where you can be seen and where you can engage with them at a more personal level. The exception to this is sometimes found when preaching to older people who have been brought up in a formal church culture. They may appreciate the formalism of the pulpit and the status it confers to what is being said.
- However, don't overdo the pacing too and fro, otherwise the congregation will feel they are watching a tennis match! Let your movements and gestures be helpful rather than irritating or distracting.
- If in doubt as to what to do with the hands, let them fall naturally by your side. As you speak, you will find they will naturally move to emphasise what you say.
- Microphones vary, but should usually be placed about 10cm in front of your mouth.

Time:

- Honour people's time. People become anxious and irritated if sermons run over time.
- Use only enough words to do the job, otherwise the message is lost in a mass of verbiage.

Manner:

Be authentic. Be you. But be a “you” that is released from inhibitions and who feels passionately that you have a “God breathed” message for the people that is important. Give it your best. We can sometimes be so “humble” that we forget to preach the gospel with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Voice:

If you speak with a good volume, it will increase the range, clarity and colour of your speaking.

Allow pauses. Use pauses to reload your brain with the next point from your notes. Try not to speak whilst looking at your notes. Pauses also allow people to reflect on what you say and to process what you say. It takes time for information to stick in people's brains so don't bombard them with information all the time.

Nervous voices are higher, harder to listen to and harder on the welfare of the speaker's throat.

Prepare your voice. Before you speak:

- 1) vibrate your lips in a burbling "brrr" sound whilst you sing up and down as if singing a musical scale.
- 2) Speak the tongue twister "red leather, yellow leather" a number of times.
- 3) Take a number of slow deep breaths (they relax you) but not so many that you hyperventilate and faint!

Give God the glory:

When you have had a positive response to your preaching, give God the glory. Remember the little donkey that carried Jesus into Jerusalem? It might have been tempted to think that everyone was waving palm branches for him.

Know Monroe's five components of persuasion:

1. Get the attention of your audience. Use an interesting 'hook' or opening point, like a shocking statistic. Be provocative and stimulate interest.
2. Create a need. Convince the audience there's a problem, explain how it affects them - and persuade them that things need to change. Preaching should not begin with the text which is then applied to people but begin with the people who are then brought to the text.
3. Define your solution. Explain what you think needs to be done.
4. Describe a detailed picture of success (or failure). Give the audience a vision; something they can see, hear, taste, and touch. Take time to fill in the colours. Get people to imagine what you are saying until they say "I get it". Note: advertising agencies paint pictures for our imaginations. Jesus also painted pictures by telling stories.
5. Ask the audience to do something right away. Get the audience involved right from the start. Then it's usually much easier to keep them engaged and active in your cause.

Preaching to Gen Ys

Research into “brain-based learning” (what other types are there!) have shown that Gen Y brains are plastic, moulding, adapting and morphing onto new ideas, moods and images all the time – and need to. It is how they learn. Therefore:

- You will need a collection of brief media bytes that vary in style.
- They are allergic to long talks (at least by the same preacher over a long period of time)
- They are allergic to written Powerpoint presentations.
- They need the sermon to be punctuated by pictures and film clips e.g. like those from *YouTube*. These need to be dramatic or humorous.
- They are highly relational. As such, they need to relate to you. Don't perform. An informal style of talking with gentle, self-deprecating humour is what's needed. Let them know you. Tell stories from your personal experience. Engage them as individuals.
- Teach through entertaining (infotainment).
- Variety is everything. Bring interviews, testimonies, film clips and group discussions into your talk.
- Relevance is everything. Socialise with them and learn what their issues are.
- Note: Managing relationships will be close to the top of the list.
- They want to know “how to” do the things that will transform their situation.

Check list:

1. How is the message relevant to them?
2. Do you have a conviction that this message is from God?
3. Name the different information presentation styles
4. Identify the humour (Note: Cull irrelevant humour)
5. Identify the visuals
6. Are the visuals relevant and impacting?
7. Where is your story?
8. Have you told them “how to” do the things that will transform their situation?

How to preach a sermon: A summary

- 1) First sentence - compels attention
- 2) First paragraph - evokes emotional commitment from your audience because of relevance and interest.
- 3) In the body of the sermon, have three clear points: each headed with a strong action word "be", "know", “do” etc.
- 4) End with a strong call to action "*Will you.....*" (You are aiming at transformation, not information.)

This pattern will ensure a good basis for your preaching. The aim is not to be legalistic in providing this pattern but to provide you with a model that works from which you can depart (with care) when you are more experienced.

GOOD QUOTES ON PREACHING

Early Australian Methodists

In Australia, the call went out from Sydney Methodists to England in 1814 "*send us a preacher.*"

J.I. Packer

The preacher should become the mouthpiece for his text ... talking only in order that the text may speak for itself and be heard, making each point from the text in such a manner 'the hearers may discern the voice of God'.²

Nehemiah

Note Nehemiah 8:1-10 which speaks of Ezra explaining Scripture so everyone could understand it.

Margaret McMillan

The preacher is not free to voice his or her own opinions. They are people who have received a tradition (1 Cor 11:23a). As such, they are ambassadors. Ambassadors are under the authority of a higher leader and their words only have authority if they speak for that leader.³

Jesus' disciples never asked him to teach them how to preach. What they did ask was for him to teach them how to pray (Lk 11:1-4). They correctly saw that Jesus' total harmony with his Father, his intimacy and love for his Father nurtured through prayer, was what gave the power in his ministry. Therefore, put a priority on developing the same love and intimacy with God.

George Morris

The witness (us) must engage in the pains, problems and pressures, the fears, foibles and frustrations of the human family.⁴

Moreover, incarnational methodology employs the language and thought forms of the particular people with whom it seeks to offer Christ. Jesus consistently used the language and the symbols of the people. He seldom used strictly religious verbiage.⁵

Jesus started where people were and found a link between their basic needs and his truth.⁶

² J.I. Packer, *God has Spoken*, (Hodder and Stoughton, 1964) p.28.

³ Margaret McMillan "Preaching Today" pp.12-14 in *Travelling EMU* (Uniting Church in Australia), 23, Summer 02-03.

⁴ G.E. Morris, "Theological Criteria for Evangelistic Methods" pp.37-45 in *Evangelism and Preaching in Secular Australia*, R.D. Drayton & G.H. Twelftree (eds.), (J.B.C.E. Melbourne, 1989), p.39.

⁵ Morris, p.39.

⁶ Morris, p.43

John Stott

*To preach is to open up the inspired text with such faithfulness and sensitivity that God's voice is heard and God's people obey him.*⁷

John Stott speaks of the task of a preacher being like building a bridge. The preacher's job is to build a bridge to span the gap of 2000 years from when the Bible was written, to the contemporary scene.⁸

Alan Walker

Powerful preaching begins with the struggle to find the message to be preached. Methods of preaching are secondary. What shall it profit a preacher if she develop effective techniques and have nothing to say?

The first and most important demand is to preach the Gospel. By what right does a minister stand before a congregation and inflict on it personal views which do not rise out of God's revealed truth in the Bible? People yearn to hear the deep throated notes of the Gospel.

The theme of the preacher is the love, the judgement, the mercy of God. The story of the preacher is the life of Jesus from Bethlehem to Calvary and to the empty tomb in Joseph's garden. The power of the preacher is the Holy Spirit, God in action today.

Preaching must come to grips with the doubts and fears, the moral failures, the confusions and pressures of living. It accepts Christ's understanding of people which is both pessimistic and hopeful about human nature. It recognises that all people must be 'born again' and believes it can happen to everybody.

True preaching can never accept the privatisation of religion. For the pulpit to be silent on the great issues of our time is to betray God and the people. Preaching always has a double task; to link people one-by-one to God, and to fashion a world society fit for people to live in.

*Prayer is the essence of effective preaching. As the time comes near for a preacher to stand up and preach, there must be a moving closer to the heart of God. By living with the message to be preached, by baptising it with prayer, power comes. Preaching is costly and its price includes constancy in prayer.*⁹

George Herbert

*LORD, how can man preach thy eternal word?
He is a brittle crazie glasse:
Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford
This glorious and transcendent place,
To be a window, through thy grace.*¹⁰

⁷ John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), p.208.

⁸ John Stott, 'Paralyzed Speakers and Hearers' in *Christianity Today*, March 18, 1981.

⁹ Alan Walker "Speaking Out: A Plea for Preaching" in *On Being*, Oct 1992, p.34.

¹⁰ George Herbert, The first verse of his poem, "The Windows".

John Macarthur

*Illustrations are critical to a good expository message. Spurgeon likens them to windows in a building. They do not support the structure but they do let the light in.*¹¹

*The minister of the Word must adapt his explanations to suit the vocabulary and interest level of those to whom he speaks. He must develop a technique of conveying in the language of a nonspecialist what he has learned from his specialised analysis.*¹²

Seven Be's of Expository Preaching:

- Be prepared
- Be interesting
- Be biblical
- Be prayerful
- Be enthusiastic
- Be authoritative
- Be relevant¹³

John Wesley, 1703-1791

*“Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen, such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of God upon earth.”*¹⁴

Richard Baxter

*O sirs, how plainly, how closely, how earnestly, should we deliver a message of such moment as ours, when the everlasting life or everlasting death of our fellow-men is involved in it!...There [is] nothing more unsuitable to such a business, than to be slight and dull. What! speak coldly for God, and for men's salvation? Can we believe that our people must be converted or condemned, and yet speak in a drowsy tone? In the name of God, brethren, labour to awaken your own hearts, before you go to the pulpit, that you may be fit to awaken the hearts of sinners...Oh, speak not one cold or careless word about so great a business as heaven or hell. Whatever you do, let the people see that you are in good earnest...A sermon full of mere words, how neatly soever it be composed, while it want the light of evidence, and the life of zeal, is but an image or a well-dress carcass.*¹⁵

Catherine Marshall

*The preparation of the heart is of far greater importance than the preparation of the sermon. The preacher's words, however clear and forceful, will not ring true unless he speaks from conviction born of experience. Many sermons which conform to all the best homiletical rules, yet have a hollow sound. There is something indefinably perfunctory about the preacher of such sermons. The matter of his sermon gives evidence of a well-stocked, well-disciplined mind; he has a good voice, a fine bearing, and restrained gestures; but somehow his heart is not in his message; it can not be said as a young clerk in a dry-goods store once said about Peter Marshall, 'He seems to know God, and he helps me to know Him better.'*¹⁶

¹¹ John Macarthur, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* (Word Publishing, 1992) p.292.

¹² Macarthur, p.143.

¹³ Macarthur, p.300.

¹⁴ John Wesley, at the age of 87, in a letter to Alexander Mather

¹⁵ Richard Baxter in *The Reformed Pastor* (1656); abridged edition (1829), in *Christianity Today*, February 10, 1992, p.38

¹⁶ Catherine Marshall, *A Man Called Peter* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1952), p.43.

Edward McKendree Bounds (1835-1913), Methodist minister

*The man, the whole man, lies behind the sermon. Preaching is not the performance of an hour. It is the outflow of a life. It takes twenty years to make a sermon, because it takes twenty years to make a man.*¹⁷

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was a brilliant theologian whose sermons had an overwhelming impact on those who heard him. One in particular, his famous “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” moved hundreds to repentance and salvation. That single message helped to spark the revival known as “The Great Awakening” (1734-1744). From a human standpoint, it seems incredible that such far-reaching results could come from one message. Edwards did not have a commanding voice or impressive pulpit manner. He used very few gestures, and he read from a manuscript. Yet God’s Spirit moved upon his hearers with conviction and power.

Few know the spiritual preparation involved in that sermon. John Chapman gives us the story: “For 3 days Edwards had not eaten a mouthful of food; for 3 nights he had not closed his eyes in sleep. Over and over again he was heard to pray, “O Lord, give me New England! Give me New England!” When he arose from his knees and made his way into the pulpit that Sunday, he looked as if he had been gazing straight into the face of God. Even before he began to speak, tremendous conviction fell upon his audience.”¹⁸

Oswald J. Smith (1889-1986, Canadian missiologist)

The world does not need sermons; it needs a message. You can go to seminary and learn how to preach sermons, but you will have to go to God to get messages.

Hudson Taylor

All God’s giants have been weak men and women who did great things for God because they reckoned on God’s power and presence being with them.

Peter Sellick

A sermon is not an opinion piece because it does not arise out of the opinion of its author but is written, as it were, under orders. Preaching is an act of obedience to the Word. It is the preacher’s task to wrestle with the text, be confronted by the text, and let the congregation know the results.

George Gittoes

George Gittoes is a war photographer and artist. In 1995 George Gittoes' painting “The Preacher – Kibeho” won the the Blake Prize for Religious Art, an annual art prize in Australia. Gittoes based his painting on a photo he took of a preacher just as he was leaving a village that was being massacred by the soldiers of the Rwandan Patriotic Army. He said about it:

¹⁷ E.M. Bounds, *Power through Prayer* [London: Marshall Brothers], p.11.

¹⁸ Source unknown.

The Preacher is probably the most famous painting I've done ... *The Preacher* has become a symbol of faith in Africa. It was during the Kibeho massacre in Rwanda ... While the massacre was going on people were rushing in herds this way and that way trying to get away from the killers. But I suddenly came to an area where everything was still and calm. There was this preacher sitting on a bag of wheat and he created this sense of calm just by reading the Bible. He was reading in French the Sermon on the Mount. It was incredible the sense of peace and beauty in that group; you could see people holding their hands in prayer. Now, whether you believe in the Spirit or not, what he did was give the people their dignity back. The preacher had two little orphans who'd sidled up to him. He'd noticed a little window where the soldiers weren't, so he said to me "Get them out now", and I did. When I came back everyone there had been killed - but I never found the preacher. I've been haunted by him since... I hope that he survived.¹⁹

D.A. Carson

Where there is no such thing as heresy, there cannot be passionate preaching!

Martyn Lloyd-Jones

Preaching is, "*the highest and greatest calling to which one can be called*".²⁰

Martin Luther

Luther's nine 'properties and virtues' of a good preacher (Summarised by John Stott and quoted in: Reg Piper, *The Ephesus Code*, [Australia, Sydney: Aquila Press, 2005] p.66.)

"He should 'teach systematically... have ready wit... be eloquent... have a good voice and... a good memory'. Next, 'he should know when to make an end... be sure of his doctrine'. Then, 'eighthly, he should venture and engage body and blood, wealth and honour, in the Word' and 'ninthly, he should suffer himself to be mocked and jeered of everyone'."

Bishop Quayle (American Methodist clergyman)

"Is preaching the art of making a sermon and delivering it? Why, no, that is not preaching. Preaching is the art of making a preacher and delivering that. It is no trouble to preach, but vast trouble to construct a preacher."

Ian Pitt-Watson

Preaching is Good News, not just good advice.

Lee Stobel

I'm suspicious of preaching that is not biblically based, but I'm also suspicious of preaching that is biblically confined. If one doesn't get out of the Bible and into people's lives, I think one has missed it.

¹⁹ See: www.media.anglican.com.au/tma/2001/2001_11/gittoes2.html

²⁰ D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971

Matthew Simpson

His throne is the pulpit; he stands in Christ's stead; his message is the word of God; around him are immortal souls; the Saviour, unseen, is beside him; the Holy Spirit broods over the congregation; angels gaze upon the scene, and heaven and hell await the issue. What associations, and what vast responsibility!

David J Schwartz²¹

The important measure of a person's vocabulary is not the size or the number of words he uses. Rather, the thing that counts, the only thing that counts about one's vocabulary, is the effect his words and phrases have on his own and others thinking.

Here is something very basic: We do not think in words and phrases. We think only in pictures and/or images. Words are the raw materials of thought. When spoken or read, that amazing instrument, the mind, automatically converts words and phrases into mind pictures. Each word, each phrase, creates a slightly different mind picture. ... When you speak or write you are, in a sense, a projector showing movies in the minds of others. And the pictures you create determine how you and others react. ... To think big we must use words and phrases which produce big, positive mental images.

Anon.

The 7 Cs of Communication: Clear, Concise, Concrete, Correct, Coherent, Complete, and Courteous.

²¹ David J Schwartz. *The Magic of Thinking Big*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).