Sermon Preparation

Introduction

The life of a preacher must be focused on God, the Bible and the congregation. The preacher 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 people before he can motivate them to respond to God's word.

To be effective, the preacher must draw on a wide variety of skills. 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 preachers are not equally careful or successful in this task.

Using a disciplined and methodical approach, a preacher can consistently produce a compelling and biblically sound message. 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 paper is to describe each of the steps necessary for effective sermon preparation.

Selecting the Text

The first step is to select a passage for further study. "If the preacher is to speak for God, he must go where God has spoken. The preacher does not create his basic message; it has been given to him. His task is to interpret, to illustrate, to apply."[2]

When selecting a text, two important goals must be kept in mind. They are related to the scope of the material and the subject of the sermon.

First, there must be enough material to fill the time allotted. A single verse can be covered relatively quickly, which allows one to join several related verses together into a topical sermon. A few paragraphs will often contain enough material on a single subject to create a cohesive message. However, covering the entire life of David, in detail, would span several chapters and contain too much material for a single sermon. It would be better to break this material up along natural divisions and cover each part through 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 the preacher must know the questions and problems facing the congregation in order to serve both them and God. "Let the needs of the congregation determine the choice of the texts."[3]

Studying the Text

The second step is to study the text. "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

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[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.

skip the hard work of determining a biblical text's meaning and move 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 that it had to 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 and 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.

Inductive study begins with a review of the material that surrounds the text. The larger the passage, the greater the amount of surrounding material that should be read until the immediate literary context becomes clear. Writing a brief outline of this material also helps to capture the author's train of thought.

This is followed with 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 New King James Version or the New American Standard Bible provide a good starting point. If a significant textual variant is involved, the preacher should review the internal and external evidence involved to determine the most likely original reading.

Grammatical analysis also includes a consideration of semantics and syntax. Sentence diagramming is a useful tool for understanding complex arguments or convoluted sentence structures because it breaks the text down into constituent parts for easier analysis. Key words, repetitive phrases and native idioms should also be explored. 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.

Many historical factors must also be considered. 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, McDowell notes that Jesus resurrected the only son of a widow (Lk 7:11ff) near the place where Elisha had raised the only son of the Shunammite woman (2 Kgs 4:18ff).[5] This helps explain why the people of that region thought that one of the prophets of old had reappeared (Lk 9:18-19).

Cultural analysis would include religious, economic and social factors. Simple items like the value of various 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 (e.g., the writings of Philo or Josephus) can add additional insight.

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[4] Walt Russell, "What It Means to Me," *Christianity Today,* 26 October 1992, 33.

[5] Josh McDowell, *A Ready Defense* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), 81.

Literary analysis takes into account 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 preacher must know how to recognize and interpret each of these forms. Distinguishing between literal and figurative language can be crucial to understanding. While didactic passages are generally clear as to rhetorical intent, narratives may contain subtle clues in the form of value judgements or commentary about certain persons or deeds. Vigilance is required.

Finally, the preacher must consider theological issues. Here the *analogia scriptura* ("analogy of Scripture") is the guiding principle; Osborne rightly observes that "doctrines should not be built on a single passage but rather should summarize all that Scripture says on that topic."[6] In addition to various commentaries, the contributions of biblical, historical and systematic theology should also be considered.

Developing Proper Applications

The next step is to develop proper applications. "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."[7]

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. To do this, the preacher 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 internalize that application before giving the sermon.

"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."[8] Zuck illustrates the relationship of this bridge to interpretation and application in the following way:

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

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

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. Paul's admonition to avoid meat sacrificed to idols was based on the principle of avoiding the appearance of evil lest a weaker brother stumble (1 Corinthians 8). While this is less of an issue for most congregations today, avoiding the appearance of evil in financial, sexual or racial matters is not.

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[6] Grant R. Osborn, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 11.
[7] Roy B. Zuck, *Walvoord: A Tribute*, (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 24-25
[8] Ibid., 26-27

Applications must also be verified by personal experience. Preaching is fundamentally an act of leadership, and "a preacher must learn to listen to God before he speaks for Him."[9] Indeed, the best way to illustrate an application is to live it. This will also strengthen the conviction that the application is practical and correct.

Organizing the Sermon

The next step is to organize all of this 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 a comprehensible presentation.

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

Ideally, the 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 (i.e., a "B" for every "A" and a "2" for every "1").

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

The first task is to write out the thesis statement. To be effective, the sermon must have a single message. While studying the text, the preacher's mind will be illuminated with 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 back to it.

The next task is to organize the body. In normal conversation, there are four basic ways to elaborate ideas: explanation, illustration, argumentation and application.[10] Some or all of the first three will be used to support the intended applications. The preacher can explain a concept, tell a story or build an argument in order to support the applications that will follow. The biblical text often provides much of this already.

The main points within the body must be stated with crystal clarity, arranged in 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.

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[9] Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980), 26.
[10] McDill, 181.

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 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 of emotion to motivate the audience to take action. 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. "If the preacher does not capture attention in the first thirty seconds, he may never gain it at all."[11] The preacher 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 to maintaining attention is to associate 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.

Some may prefer to prepare these segments in a different order. Regardless of how they are prepared, the major segments (i.e., the introduction, body and conclusion) should follow the old adage: "Tell them what you are going tell them; tell them what you are telling them; then tell them what you have told them."[12] 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. As Paul noted, a preacher must speak clearly if his audience is to understand him (1 Cor 14:9 NASB)

The goal is to hone the ability to communicate the message. Practicing a sermon several times beforehand will allow the preacher to practice various phrasings so they flow smoothly when needed.

Here, the mechanics of speech communication come to the fore. 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 as in normal conversation.

Above all, the qualities of the voice are crucial. The preacher 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; deep breathing will help ease tension and slow the pace of delivery. However, there must be sufficient vocal variety to avoid a monotone delivery.

Lastly, the preacher must have a method for personal feedback. While videotape is brutally honest in reproducing the preacher's delivery, a spouse or trusted friend provides an objective, human reaction that cannot be automated. Value judgements about the use of humor or the appropriateness of certain material must come from an external source. Habitual weaknesses in delivery must be targeted and overcome.

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[11] Robinson, 160.

[12] Ibid., 116.

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. The preacher begins by selecting a text that relates to the spiritual needs of the audience. A careful study uncovers any timeless principles contained in that text. If a principle is relevant to the audience, the preacher must develop appropriate applications based on that principle and then verify them by personal experience. The material is then organized into an outline that captures the results of prior study and articulates them in terms that everyone can understand. Lastly, the preacher practices sermon delivery to optimize oral communication of the message.

The preparation and delivery of a biblical message is a valuable service to both God and the audience. 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 may require considerable effort to develop good preaching skills, there can be no higher calling than helping other people to establish a right relationship with their Creator.

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