

The Pastor and Preaching: How to Start, Sustain, and End a Sermon

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Introductory Comments

1. A word about the title –
2. The importance of this topic –
3. The focus of this topic –
4. A necessary and urgent word –

I. FOUNDATIONS

A. A Definition of Preaching

- Any good definition of preaching must address both the substance of and the form of preaching
- “Preaching is the public oral proclamation of God’s written word by an appointed messenger by which God’s word is brought effectively to the listeners.”
- Preaching as connecting two great realities

B. Three Operating Assumptions

1. Regarding the Nature of the Word – What the Word *Is*

- The Word of God

- This Word is spoken to us

- “One way to express this is to say that our lives are in the Bible, and we do not understand them until we find them there.” J.I. Packer

- God’s Word does address the realities—especially the “eternities and the immensities” (Alexander Whyte)—of human being.

Sum. – God’s Word is a word that is purposefully addressing the important realities of human existence.

2. Regarding the Nature of Preaching – What Preaching *Is*

- “Preach *the word*; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.” II Timothy 4:2

- Preaching *is* exposition of Scripture (cf. handout on “A Biblical Case for Expository Preaching”).

- “The preacher will take care to make clear that what he offers is not his own ideas, but God’s message from God’s book, and will see it as his task not to talk for his text, but to let the text talk through him.” J.I. Packer

- “The task of the sermon is to create space for the Word of God.” Karl Barth

- An expository sermon is one in which the content and intent is controlled by the content and intent of a particular passage of Scripture.

Sum. - Preaching is faithful exposition of Scripture.

3. Regarding the Purpose of Preaching – What Preaching *Does*

- Preaching *brings* the Word of God to people.
- Preaching is not simply the coverage of biblical material, but the accomplishment of a biblical intention. Once we have selected a preaching passage, our first task in sermon preparation is to identify the effect God intended to accomplish through this particular word. This intended redemptive effect is located at the intersection of the Word of God and some specific condition of humanity. This intended redemptive effect can be described as the “primary claim” or the “burden” of the text.
- Success in this should produce in the listener the experience of being personally addressed.
- “...as if they [speaking of the ‘fashionable’ appearance of some clergy] were more disposed to court a maid, then *to bear upon their hearts the weighty concernments* of God’s Kingdom.” Solomon Stoddard
- All of our preaching, and all of every sermon—beginning, middle and end—should be designed to bring the weight of the Word to bear upon the hearts of the people.

A Brief Excursus on Determining the Primary Claim

- Main questions to ask – Why is this here? What is the greatly desired effect God intends to accomplish through speaking this word? What is the *mind of God* in this passage?
- Secondary Questions to ask – Where is the prominence or emphasis given in this passage? What is the central point of reference? What is the point on which the passage pivots? At what point does the passage gather to a head?
- “Spend your earliest and best time reading the text of the Bible itself. I’m afraid that too often pastors can fall into the trap of spending 90 percent of their time reading commentaries *about the text* and then spend only the last 10 percent of their time reading *the text of the Bible itself*. But when that happens, people tend only to see problems and disputed meanings in every

phrase rather than seeing *the clear and strong message of the text itself*. Since this is God's Word, it is especially important that we do this while consciously being in the presence of God, asking him to help us understand his Word rightly." Wayne Grudem

- "Nothing is more important than that we should be sure that we have got at the main thrust of the text, and let that come out." D. M. Lloyd-Jones
- This claim, wherein the weight of the text lies, controls *the entire sermon*. The beginning of your sermon introduces and heightens this claim. The body of your sermon explains and advances this claim. The end of your sermon applies and presses this claim.

Now, taking our cue from these operating assumptions, let's think about the specific tasks of the beginning, middle and end of your sermon. In each case there is something you are seeking to accomplish. In each case you should be asking, "What do I need to get done here? What do I need to do *here* to fulfill my obligation to God's Word and to these people?"

II. BEGINNING, MIDDLING, AND ENDING

A. Beginning – What is my task here? What am I trying to get done?

1. Purpose –

- The main thing you want is for your people to feel the weight of the Word as it intersects with their life. This happens as you identify the specific dimension of the human condition which God is intending to redemptively address in his Word.
- Having identified that, you ask, "What kind of introduction will, not just logically lead to that, but embody that?"
- Application begins in the introduction.

2. Compositional Implications – How is this going to show up in the actual writing of your sermon?

- a. Craft a clear and compelling proposition or proposition-like statement.
 - “I have a 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 any sermon ought to be preached, or even written, until that sentence has emerged, clear and lucid as the cloudless moon.” J.H. Jowett
 - This sentence should be accurate, single, clear, and it should make some claim on the listener

- b. Craft a clean, lean, simple, big-cat-with-eyes-focused-and-tail-twitching-like introduction.
 - Ask, “How can I get there (i.e., to the intersection of Word and life represented by your claim) quickly but powerfully?” It is particularly important in the introduction that everything pay its way. Be lean. That doesn’t necessarily mean brief, it just means there is no excess.
 - Think in terms of clearly showing the point of connection between Word and life. “By framing [this] in the introduction the whole message penetrates daily experience with an application thrust that begins with the preacher’s first words.” Bryan Chapell

- c. Plan on reading your text as part of your introduction.
 - Read your text in such a way as to purposefully anticipate your sermon’s claim.

B. Sustaining – What is my task here? What am I trying to get done?

1. Purpose –

- The main thing you are seeking to do in the body of your sermon is sustain and strengthen, by means of biblical exposition, the connection you made in your introduction. Sometimes you will do this by more fully explaining the claim by means of biblical exposition. Sometimes you will do this by arguing for the truth or value of the claim by means of biblical exposition. Sometimes you will do this by heightening the claim by means of biblical exposition. Whatever the case, you are building continuity and gathering force and momentum for your claim, all the time letting the content of the text determine what you are using and the development of the text determine how you do it.
- You must be ruthless in making sure everything is contributing to the forward motion of your claim. Do not shoot yourself in the foot by some distracting intrusion that forfeits momentum and clarity!

2. Compositional Implications – How is this going to show up in the actual writing of your sermon?

- a. You should have a *functioning* proposition which is regularly referenced in your sermon to give unity, focus and force to your development.
- b. Have a clearly coherent development in your main points. They should clearly advance the proposition.
 - Test your mains—Are they subordinate to the proposition? Are they distinct from each other?
 - The value of an organizational sentence
- c. In your secondary development, *preach close to your mains!* Make sure every piece is clearly contributing to the accumulation of the weight of your sermon's claim.

C. Ending – What is my task here? What am I trying to get done?

1. Purpose –

- The main thing you are seeking to do at the close of your sermon is refocus the claim of your passage and call for a right response.
- In refocusing the claim, you are not simply refocusing an idea. You are refocusing the intersection between Word and life with all the weight of the Word brought now to bear.
- In calling for a right response (application), think of this as the unavoidable consequence of the intersection between Word and life without which the sermon will both *feel* and *be* incomplete. Good preaching, by its very nature, “pleads with people to respond to the Word of God” (J. Piper).
- The main thing in application is *always to point your people to Christ*, to reinvest them in the Savior. You must bring them to Christ!
- “To the evangelical preacher I would address one simple but pointed question, a question every one of us should ask ourselves as we prepare to preach: How does this passage of Scripture, and consequently my sermon, testify to Christ?” Graeme Goldsworthy
- Tell the people of the sufficiency of Christ in his living, his dying and his present ministry toward them. Preach the functional Gospel. Speak of Christ’s past work for us and his present work in us. Don’t make the mistake of liberal Christianity which reduced the message of the Bible to ethics.
- Ask the question relative to the conclusion of your sermon: *Have these people been pastored here by a gospel-loving, Christ-presenting pastor?*

2. Compositional Implications – How is this going to show up in the actual writing of your sermon?

- a. Include an explicit and clear return to the statement of your primary claim (i.e. your proposition).

b. Carefully consider the “nature” of your application.

- There is a tendency with application to leave people with “What am I supposed to do?” While certainly there are commands to obey, sins to forsake, etc., not all of Scripture addresses us in this way. Consider carefully, what is the *nature* of the desired effect God is seeking to achieve? Much of Scripture is designed to get us to simply believe things about God and Christ. What does your text call for? Frame your application in light of this divine intention.

c. While it is not necessary, the conclusion does present the opportunity to *heighten* the claim through some elevation of language and delivery or through some culminating illustration.

A Concluding Word about Unction

- “The sacred anointing upon the preacher, and the divine power applying truth to the hearer, these are infinitely more important than any details of manner.” C. Spurgeon
- “‘The knowledge of God shall fill the earth, as the waters the sea.’ Wherever this is accomplished, it will not be effected by human learning, or by the skill or wisdom of great men. ‘Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit saith the Lord of Hosts.’ It will not be by the enticing words of man’s wisdom, but by the demonstration of the Spirit and power.” J. Edwards
- “All the hope of our ministry lies in the Spirit of God operating on the spirit of men.” C. Spurgeon
- “What is this? It is the Holy Spirit falling upon the preacher in a special manner. It is an access of power. It is God giving power, and enabling, through the Spirit, to the preacher in order that he may do this work in a manner that lifts it *beyond the efforts and endeavors of man* to a position in which the preacher is being used by the Spirit and becomes the channel through whom the Spirit works.” D.M. Lloyd-Jones
- *Yet*, he does so with “prepared” and therefore “useful instruments.” *Our careful, devoted labor renders us more useful!*
- So, “*Do your best* to present yourself to God as one approved, *a worker* who has no need to be ashamed, *rightly handling* the word of truth” (II Timothy 2:15). “*Devote yourself* to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (I Timothy 4:13). And *trust* that as you submit yourself to your God-given labor, both as a preparer and a preacher of sermons, your preaching will be a demonstration of the Spirit’s power—to God’s greater glory.