

# Constructing A Sermon

## The Research Stage

Gather as much data as you can. Fill lots of pieces of paper with thoughts/ideas/information.

### Know your audience

Every aspect of your preaching should be determined by your knowledge of your audience – the topic you choose; what you say about it; how you say it; etc.

It is often said that the preacher needs not only to be able to exegete the text but to exegete the culture. He/she must be able to study and understand the audience and their culture, needs, hopes etc. in order to connect with them.

### Pray

Preaching is more than oratory and skill. We want to preach with the power of God so that lives are supernaturally changed through our ministry. We cannot do that by ourselves. We need the empowering of the Holy Spirit at every step in the process of constructing the sermon – from understanding our audience and choosing a topic to delivery. Do not neglect to pray.

### Decide on your topic

This step might not be necessary. It may be that you start with the scriptures and the topic arises out of the passage. In that case, simply skip to the next step.

On the other hand, it might be that your knowledge of your audience suggests certain topics as being relevant. Rick Warren says that Jesus always responded to people's felt needs, and never ignored the current need in order to follow a prescribed preaching scheme. God can use your knowledge of your people to highlight a particular topic. Often they might arise out of conversation.

Or out of prayer when the Holy Spirit prompts and your spirit says, "This is it!"

Sometimes a current event that people are talking about seems to require a Christian perspective.

Please note that at this point you have a topic but you don't have a message. You have a message only after the Bible study when you have discovered what God says about this topic.

### Choose your passage(s)

Biblical preaching will be centred on one or more Bible passages, but which passages?

**Follow a plan.**

If you are following a lectionary or preaching a series of sermons, you already know where you are heading. The initial planning takes a lot of pressure off the preacher who otherwise might be trying to settle on a theme during the week before the service.

**If you have a topic already...**

...you will need to do some broad Bible study to find passages that appear to be relevant. Once you have done some serious study of them you will probably choose either one main passage that seems particularly relevant or a number of passages that speak to different aspects of the topic. Books, articles etc on the topic may suggest possible Bible readings.

**A passage that attracts your attention**

Sometimes God will lead you to the passage He wants you to use.

However, just because a passage interests you doesn't mean it is relevant to other people. Be sure that it is what God wants you to share and that you are not simply exploring your own interests. You preach as a servant of the congregation, not to just do your own thing.

**Desperation!**

When you have nothing else and Sunday is approaching fast!

**Study the Bible passages**

By studying the Bible we discover what God says.

Bible study may involve three stages:

- Observation – what the Bible actually says
- Interpretation – what the Bible means
- Application – how I can put that teaching into practice

The preacher's task is to build a bridge between the text and the lives of his/her hearers. To do that he/she must have one foot in the text, understanding what it meant to its original readers, and one foot in the contemporary world, understanding how this teaching applies to people today. Consequently, all three stages of Bible study require diligent work. This is a discipline that bears fruit when it results in powerful, Biblically faithful and relevant sermons.

**Gather other material**

- Stories
- Illustrations
- Application ideas
- Etc.

## **The Discernment Stage**

Sift the data. What does it tell you? What are the key elements? What should you use?

### **Identify your message**

What is the key thing God is leading you to say? Be clear about that in your own mind.

It is often suggested that a preacher should be able to state his/her message in one sentence. If people were to go away remembering only one thing, what would you want that one thing to be?

You may, of course, make several main points but there should be one central message.

That message should be derived from the Biblical study; from discovering what God says about this topic.

### **Identify your purpose**

Why are you preaching this message? You need to be able to answer that question for yourself.

We want to produce doers of the Word, not hearers only. Your purpose will state what you want to happen as a result of people hearing this sermon?

Bill Hybels says, "Tell them what you want them to know and tell them what you want them to do."

### **Select the key ideas and material**

From your study you probably have much more material than you can actually use. There may be many facets to the topic and lots of different ways of addressing it. To try to cover everything will simply bury people in too much information, therefore narrow your focus. Eliminate some material.

Be strategic. Choose those aspects that best serve your purpose. Retain only your best material.

You may find you have now identified the handful of main points you want to make in your sermon.

## **The Writing Stage**

Order the data. How do you present it?

### **Outline your sermon**

Decide on a basic structure. At this stage, don't worry about the details or the precise wording – just where you are heading. What are the main points and what order will they come in? Remember to strive for a logical progression that people can follow and that actually leads to your conclusion.

There are well recognised sermons structures e.g.

Deductive sermons start with a statement of the central message and then develop that by

- Explaining it – leads to understanding
- Proving it – leads to conviction
- Applying it – leads to action (hopefully)

Inductive sermons build up to the message which is stated in the conclusion, e.g. they might describe a problem and talk about various attempts to solve it, before finally giving the Biblical approach.

Semi-inductive sermons state the topic at the beginning but not the central message. The sermon then leads up to the statement of the message at the end.

In inductive-deductive sermons the introduction and first couple of points might lead to the statement of the message and the remainder of the sermon develops that message.

However, it is unlikely that you will consciously decide on a particular formal structure. The most important thing is to actually have a structure (whatever it is) so that you don't simply ramble.

Secondly, have a structure that actually helps you achieve your purpose. For example, stating the message at the beginning means that your hearers know what you are talking about and can relate everything else to it. On the other hand, not stating the message until the end can create a sense of tension or anticipation as people wonder what the conclusion is going to be. It can also mean that your hearers feel they have discovered something by thinking through the previous material rather than simply been told what to think or do. Use a structure that is going to help you achieve your purpose.

Thirdly, you might benefit by varying your approach so that you don't become predictable to the extent that people no longer need to listen.

#### General outline

Whether inductive, deductive or somewhere in between, most sermons can be outlined something like:

- Introduction
- Main point 1
  - Sub-point 1
    - Detail
    - Detail
    - Detail
  - Sub-point 2
    - Detail
    - Detail
- Main point 2

Etc...

- Conclusion

Some people choose to format their scripts with paragraphs indented as above. Such a layout provides visual clues about the structure that can then influence their presentation. It also helps quickly find your place again after you have looked up and spoken.

Producing an outline of your sermon *after* it is written (e.g. to use as handout notes) can help identify places where the structure, or progression, is confused.

Provided it is not too complicated, a structure enables the listeners to relate the different sections to the whole and to understand where the sermon is heading.

### Transitions

Of course, listeners cannot hear a structure. They only hear the content. They need audible clues as to where they are in the structure. There must be clear transitions between the major points.

- Questions that introduce new issues
- A summary of the points already covered and the introduction of the next point
- A few words such as, “The second problem with anger is...”
- A whole paragraph that leads people from one point to the next.

The transitions probably won't be written until the next step but it is important to realise how important good transitions are so that people can follow the logic. Transitions should be planned, not spontaneous.

### **Add in all the supporting material**

Now is the time to work on how you are going to say what you want to say. What words are you going to use? What stories would help?

- Explanations
- Facts
- Definitions
- Quotations
- Stories
- Illustrations
- Examples
- Visuals
- Video clips
- Drama

Creativity and imagination go a long way. Different media help address different learning styles and provide variety and therefore interest. Just be sure that what you use does help achieve your purpose and isn't gimmicky or a distraction from your message.

Most sermons, however, will depend largely on the spoken word. It is therefore important to harness all our public speaking skills, using

- Word pictures (that people can “see” what you are talking about)
- Vivid expressions that catch people’s attention (as opposed to tired old lazy ones)
- Powerful words
- Use of examples understood by the listeners
- New concepts that are related to known concepts
- Good use of our voice including varying the pitch and pace and using pause
- Passion and enthusiasm
- Etc. etc etc.

Some of these elements are present only in the delivery, of course. Nevertheless, they can be planned in the writing stage and the script marked as a reminder of special emphasis needed.

**Introduction and conclusion**

The introduction and conclusion are especially important.

The introduction is crucial for grabbing people’s attention. If the introduction is weak the rest of the sermon may be pointless if people aren’t listening.

The conclusion is the climax. It will be remembered longer than the rest. It is important it clearly brings the sermon to a powerful end. You might use a particularly potent quote or a bold statement or a clear expression of what people should do next.

In order to start well and finish well you might choose to write the introduction and conclusion first. The body of the sermon is then designed to get people from the starting point to the finish.

**Script, notes or nothing?**

Preaching from a full script is not less spiritual than preaching with only a leather-bound Bible in your hand, and vice versa. Each has its advantages and disadvantages.

	Disadvantages	Advantages
Full script	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A more stilted, “read” presentation</li> <li>• Less eye contact</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Security. Less chance of your mind going blank.</li> <li>• The exact wording can be carefully planned.</li> <li>• Less chance of rambling.</li> </ul>
No notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relying on memory creates extra pressure and</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater freedom of movement and of</li> </ul>

	<p>increases the chance of going blank.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A less polished, sometimes hesitant, presentation.</li> </ul>	<p>expression.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater opportunity for eye contact when not looking constantly at the script.</li> </ul>
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Perhaps the ideal is in between i.e. notes. There is then the potential for the “best of both worlds.”

Some can cope well without notes or script. That’s fine, but those who need them are better to have them.

Irrespective of what is carried into the pulpit, the sermon should be written out in full in the preparation stage. This forces the preacher to think about the words he will use, the transitions, the likely length of the sermon etc. Thoughts can remain fuzzy until written down.

Work on finding the right words.

***“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.” (Mark Twain)***

### **Rehearse and refine**

The script can then be read out loud a number of times to refine its wording and flow and to achieve familiarity. After that, if he/she is sufficiently confident, the preacher can leave it behind or make notes.

Be ruthless. Refine. Refine. Refine. Ask questions of the sermon. Is anything ambiguous? Is the progression logical and easily followed? Are there any words that will not be understood? Is some of it simply padding that could be left out without losing anything?

Is the meaning immediately obvious? Remember, listeners cannot go back and listen again if it wasn’t clear the first time.

Speakers must also use shorter sentences than writers. Clarity increases as sentence length decreases.

Be specific and precise. There is a real discipline in being clear without being wordy.

Think about your attitude. Are you coming across as arrogant or angry or bored? Is that what you want?

### **The Delivery Stage**

No matter what you feel like, look, and sound, as if you are confident and really mean what you say. Look people in the eye. Allow yourself to proclaim God’s message.

You have done the preparation, now go for it!

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