

BUILDING BETTER SERMONS: STRUCTURING FOR CLARITY AND PURPOSE

One local church elder lamented: “As a businessman, I’ve been in Rotary for almost thirty years, and every month we have a meeting and someone gives a talk of some sort. When I go home, I can tell my wife what the talk was about, and how the person made his point. But I can rarely do that with sermons. I think we should shut the theological seminaries down and send our [pastoral] candidates to Rotary International.”¹ That is such a sad indictment!

John MacArthur has also observed the thing that kills people in what is sometimes called expository preaching is randomly meandering through a passage. So, how do we build better sermons and structure them for clarity and purpose?

EXPOSITORY PREACHING

An expository sermon is one in which a portion of Scripture is interpreted in relation to one theme or central idea. The bulk of the material for the sermon is drawn directly from the passage of Scripture and the outline consists of a series of progressive ideas centered around one main idea.

All true expository messages have the following characteristics:

1. a clear focus on the Scripture (often / usually just one basic passage)
2. hermeneutical integrity and accuracy (preach the point of the passage)
3. order, structure, cohesion
4. logical movement and direction
5. powerful application

The expository unit you choose to preach consists of a passage of Scripture out of which a central idea emerges. Not only the leading ideas of the passage but also the details should be explained and made to furnish the basic materials of the sermon in expository preaching. The theme of the passage must be developed by a series of progressive ideas all related to the central thought / the proposition. The mark of expository preaching is to make clear and plain the meaning of Scripture.

PREPARING A SERMON: AN OVERVIEW

Consider the needs of your people.

Pray about your congregation, asking God to direct you so that you can effectively minister to your people. You are about to devote many weeks / months to a series, so approach this prayerfully. And remember: the best counseling you can do is preventive counseling done from the pulpit in your sermons as God’s Word ministers to your congregation before they encounter problems.

Select the series to preach.

Ask yourself: is this the appropriate portion of the Bible for the needs of this congregation at this time? Observe your congregation in their circumstances in life and think about where the church’s level of maturity is. Not every church is alike... for example, not every church is ready to do a deep dive into a verse-by-verse series on the Book of Hebrews. It’s a tough book to preach through, with all the O.T. background needed and interpreting those warning passages. Same with Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

¹ T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Preach* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), p. 21

Set up a rough idea of your preaching calendar.

Once you've selected your series, think through how long you'll take to complete it. This will be based on the length of the portions you think you'll take work through the series. Younger preachers typically preach longer portions of Scripture and older preachers, with more experience, typically preach shorter portions. When thinking about your preaching calendar, you are about to embark on an adventure led by the Holy Spirit, and sometimes He will direct your sermons to linger for more time than you anticipated in one passage. But as a rule, before beginning a new series seek to unfold the general thought units—the preaching passages—of the Bible passages you plan to preach.

Begin your study.

This is where the bulk of your work on the sermon will be. Meticulously study the specific portion of the Bible you'll be preaching from. Analyze its structure, translate it, determine the crucial exegetical concepts, find the main idea in each thought unit. And as you study, simultaneously you will begin crafting the sermon's homiletical outline and content.

THE STAGES OF SERMON PREPARATION

An expositor needs to develop a plan for studying his sermons. His method should be systematic and should include basic steps (stages) for sermon preparation. Consider these...

Stage 1: Conduct an overview of the passage and begin to gather your notes.

1. Read the book in its entirety.

MacArthur writes: "I usually preach through entire books of the New Testament, so I always begin by reading the whole book. You cannot begin your exposition of a Bible book until you have read and generally observed the message and flow of thinking through all of it. Maturing as an expository preacher, I have come to realize how important this step is. When I was less experienced, I sometimes found myself chasing down rabbit trails in my interpretation because I lacked familiarity with a book's theme... Context is the most important hermeneutical principle. By reading and familiarizing ourselves with the entire book, the expositor can relate each passage to the overall context of the book. Putting together a general outline of the book and identifying key verses is also helpful in grasping the overall flow." (MacArthur, *PREACHING: How to Preach Biblically*, p. 179)

2. Read the specific passage and the surrounding context in English.

Since context is vitally important, the purpose at this stage is to determine the author's flow of thought by carefully noting the passage's surrounding context: its context in the book, its immediately preceding context before your passage and its immediately following context after your passage. Reflect on the specific passage, noting special questions or observations for further study, especially work you'll need to do in the original. "The first step in studying an individual passage is to read it. I read it repeatedly in my English Bible." (MacArthur, *PREACHING: How to Preach Biblically*, p. 179)

Stage 2: Meticulously analyze the structure.

- 1. In English, carefully observe the passage*, paying close attention to: (1) all conjunctions and transitional markers like "therefore" "but" "for" "because" "since;" (2) all verbs because they carry the action; (3) repeated words; and (4) key words / phrases.
- 2. In Hebrew or Greek* use whatever your skills and resources in the original language that you have to work your way through translation, vocabulary, word-order, and structural connections. As much as you are able, work back from English to the original language. Use study tools like Logos Bible software and Bible Hub.
- 3. Diagram the passage*, especially in your early years of developing expository habits. Block diagramming the passage or even diagramming each sentence helps you understand the structure.

4. *Begin your detailed lexical analysis* of the words and grammar, especially in the original. This work will continue all the way to the end of your sermon study. Use Precept Austin here or even Tom Constable's Notes.
5. Check out John Piper's videos "Look at the Book" for some amazing structural analyses.

Stage 3: State the Central Truth of the whole message in a single sentence.

1. It is essential that your sermon be the embodiment of a single idea. This concept is referred to as the "big idea," the thesis, the summary sentence, the unifying concept, or the proposition. It is the main idea the passage is teaching. Our goal is not to "comment on the words of a passage," or to "explain all the phrases," but instead to arrive at a single idea, which is the point of the passage.
2. This truth is the sermon in a nutshell. It represents the dominant thrust of the message, the thing you want the listener to remember even if he forgets everything else. It is the "take-home truth."
3. Once you arrive at the Central Truth, write it down and begin to organize the sermon.

Stage 4: Organize the passage.

1. Once the main point has been determined, look for subordinating points to support it. They will often relate to the subordinate verbs, participles, and/or infinitives.
2. This is the first step in outlining the passage. It also provides a confirmation of the main point. If the main point is not broad enough to include all the other thoughts or is not fully supported by them, it needs to be reworked.

Stage 5: Begin to shape the homiletical outline.

1. Your outline will progress through two stages as it moves toward a final sermonic form. In the early outline form, you are not yet forming your homiletical outline, rather you are seeking to determine the structural flow of the passage based on your exegetical work. This is not the outline for the sermon, so it should not be concerned with wording (like alliteration) but with exegetical accuracy. It is a rough outline (in wording), but accurate (in exegesis)
2. The exegetical outline is historical, accurately reflecting the original author's unfolding progression of thought. The exegetical outline presents what "happened" back then in the Bible.
3. Eventually you will begin to shape your exegetical outline into its ultimate sermonic outline. The sermonic outline will be the logical development of your plural noun proposition. It will be the truth of your Bible passage communicated in a contemporary way to your specific audience. The sermonic outline presents what is "happening" today as you preach to your congregation now.

Stage 6: Make it come alive.

1. This last stage is where you work to make the passage come alive for the congregation. This is where you work on application points (a crucial part of the sermon!) and illustrations (to help explain your passage and/or help apply it).
2. As you come to the close of your study, this is when you should write your Introduction and Conclusion. Once you've built the house (the main body of the sermon), you build the porch (Introduction) and the back door (Conclusion).

3. Pray, pray, pray. Pray for yourself: accuracy, clarity, power in the pulpit. Pray for your people: they will understand, they will obey. The Bible is a supernatural Book, and we are dependent upon the Holy Spirit to do the ministering to the eternal souls of men and women and boys and girls. Pray!

Spend time evaluating each sermon before you preach it.

Most of us, before we preach, are properly concerned with content issues: exegesis and interpretation of the text, theological and personal reflection, appropriate metaphors and illustrations and application points. But after we preach, we tend to concentrate on communication issues: *"Was the message sent by me, the message I meant to send?" "Could they follow me?" "Did I present the ideas clearly and concisely?"* Ask yourself several questions as you go through the preaching process (like a pilot with his pre-flight checklist).

- Am I saying anything urgent?
Does it make a difference to anyone? Is the subject of this sermon important to the hearers? Preaching that is urgent connects with people where they live and where they are hurting, it is relevant to them today.
- Am I pressing for action?
What is there in the passage for the hearers to learn, to do, to change, to stop doing, to be, to become? Or is this sermon simply a cold sharing of biblical material? Do I expect some movement of attitude or values? Am I presenting the gospel clearly enough for the lost to be saved? Good preaching carries with it the expectation of action. The goal is for people to incarnate the Word.
- Is this more than a lecture?
Am I stuck in a cloistered frame of mind while the people languish in the pew?
- Am I addressing this congregation as fellow pilgrims in the life of faith?
Do I see them as a company of antagonists? Am I sharing with them the struggle to integrate the life of the Spirit in our crawl-out-of-bed-and-go-to-work-again life? Or are they left floundering in an ocean of dogmatic pontifications delivered by a cold expert who lives far from their reality?

IMPORTANCE OF A PLURAL NOUN PROPOSITION

To qualify as an expository sermon, the outline must be derived from an accurate understanding of the exegesis of the text to be preached. Remember this is a step by step process that involves great effort, which we introduced in previous lectures and will continue to develop in future classes.

The plural noun proposition summarizes the main points of the sermon into a single sentence. **A plural noun proposition helps provide order, structure, clarity.** It helps your hearers understand, in a concise way, the content and purpose of the sermon. It helps them orient their minds to what you say (NOTE: there is a big difference between oral communication and written communication).

The proposition is a single statement which expresses the main idea or central theme of your message.

- *"Until you can capsulize the purpose of the sermon in one crisp sentence, you probably do not yet have it clearly fixed enough in your own mind - even if you think you do."* (Jay Adams)
- *"No sermon is ready until we can express its theme in a short, pregnant sentence. I do not think any sermon ought to be preached or even written until that sentence has emerged."* (Henry Jowett)

Here are the features in my plural noun propositional statements.

1. I create a plural noun proposition where I tell them the number of points in the sermon outline and use a noun (person, place, or thing) to describe the outline points. Examples:
 - *“In this passage we will see three keys [a number + a plural noun] . . .”*
 - *“Here the Apostle Paul gives us four steps [a number + a plural noun] . . .”*
 - *“Jesus presents two warnings [a number + a plural noun] . . .”*
2. I usually include second person “you” or “your,” or all-inclusive words like “everyone” or “anyone,” etc. in my propositions. I do this because I want my hearers to know that everything in the sermon is for them, not just the application points. Examples:
 - *“From this passage I want to show you four ingredients [a number + a plural noun] needed to...”*
 - *“In these verses you will see five reasons [a number + a plural noun] to ...”*
 - *“Three ways [a number + a plural noun] you can pray in the will of God.”*
3. The proposition can be expressed in more than one way.
 - Statement: *“In this passage we will examine four characteristics of a man of integrity that will help us understand what it means to be a man after God’s own heart.”*
 - Question: *“What are some reasons for trusting God when you’re in the midst of a trial? Here are three...”*
 - Exhortation: *“As we study this passage, commit yourself to following these four steps to resolving conflict in your marriage.”*
 - Exclamation: *“What a joy it is to contemplate the three proofs of God’s sovereignty that we find in this passage!”*

EXAMPLE OF A PLURAL NOUN PROPOSITION AND OUTLINE

Passage: Ephesians 1:3-8

Proposition: Four of the blessings we have in Christ (based on “blessing” in v.3)

Sermon Outline:

First, we are chosen in Him (v.4)

Second, we are adopted in Him (vv. 5-6)

Third, we have redemption in Him (v.7a)

Fourth, we have forgiveness in Him (vv. 7b-8)

NOUNS TO CONSIDER FOR YOUR PROPOSITION STATEMENT

abuses
 actualities
 accusations
 admonitions
 affairs
 affirmations
 agreements
 alternatives
 angles
 answers
 applications
 approaches
 areas
 arguments
 aspects
 aspirations
 assertions
 assurances
 assumptions
 attitudes
 attributes
 avocations
 axioms

 barriers
 beginnings
 beliefs
 benefits
 bequests
 bestowments
 blemishes
 blessings
 blows
 blockades
 blots
 blunders
 boasts
 bonds
 books
 boundaries
 breaches
 burdens

 calls
 categories

causes
 certainties
 challenges
 changes
 charges
 circumstances
 commands
 commitments
 comparisons
 conceptions
 concessions
 corrections
 criteria
 criticisms
 crowns
 cults
 cultures
 customs

 dangers
 debts
 decisions
 declarations
 deeds
 deficiencies
 definitions
 degrees
 departments
 details
 differences
 directives
 disciplines
 disclosures
 discoveries
 divisions
 doctrines
 doubts
 doors
 dreams
 duties

 editions
 effects
 elements
 encouragements

examples
 excesses
 exchanges
 exclamations
 experiments
 explanations
 exponents
 exposures
 expositions
 expostulations
 expressions
 extremes

 facets
 facts
 factors
 faculties
 failures
 falls
 families
 faults
 fears
 feelings
 fields
 finalities
 flaws
 forces
 forms
 formalities
 foundations
 functions
 fundamentals

 gains
 generalizations
 gifts
 graces
 groups
 guarantees
 guides

 habits
 handicaps
 honors
 hopes

hungers	manifestations	panaceas
hurts	manners	parables
	marks	paradoxes
ideas	materials	paragraphs
ideals	means	parallels
idols	measures	particulars
ills	meetings	parties
illuminations	members	parts
illustrations	memories	paths
imitations	mentions	patterns
impacts	mercies	peaks
impediments	methods	peculiarities
imperatives	ministries	penalties
imperfections	miseries	perceptions
implements	misfortunes	perfections
implications	mistakes	performances
impossibilities	models	perils
impressions	moods	periods
improvements	motives	perplexities
inadequacies	mountains	persons
incentives	movements	personalities
incidents	mysteries	petitions
ingredients		phases
injunctions	names	philosophies
invitations	narratives	phrases
irritations	natures	pictures
issues	necessities	pieces
items	needs	places
	nights	plagues
joys	norms	plans
judgments	notes	pleas
justifications	numbers	pledges
		plots
keys	objects	points
kinds	objectives	positions
	obligations	possibilities
labors	observances	powers
lapses	obstacles	practices
laws	occasions	prayers
leads	occurrences	precautions
lessons	offenses	predicaments
levels	offers	predictions
liabilities	offices	premises
liberties	omissions	preparations
lights	operations	prescriptions
limits	opinions	pressures
links	opponents	pretensions
lists	options	principles
locations	orders	privileges
looks	organizations	prizes
losses	origins	problems
loyalties		processes

products
profits
prohibitions
promises
proofs
prophecies
propositions
prospects
provisions
punishments
purposes
pursuits

qualifications
qualities
quantities
queries
quests
questions
quotas
quotations

ranks
ratings
reactions
reasons
recommendations
records
recruits
references
regions
regulations
rejections
relapses
relations
responses
restraints
results
revelations
rewards
roads
roles
roots
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sacrifices
satisfactions
sayings
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scars
schools

schemes
seals
secrets
selections
sentiments
sequences
services
shields
situations
skills
solicitations
solutions
sources
spheres
states
statements
steps
stipulations
stresses
strokes
styles
subjects
sufferings
superlatives
suppositions
superiorities
supports
symptoms
systems

tactics
talents
tasks
teachings
tendencies
tests
theories
theses
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tones
topics
traces
traits
treasures
trends
trials
triumphs
troubles

truths
types

uncertainties
undertakings
units
urges
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vacancies
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worries
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yieldings
yokes

zones