

How do I make a Sermon?



I've done it for more than 30 years, and so it happens almost without consciously thinking through the steps. Try to put it into words then – it's like describing to a novice driver what you've done for years with the steering wheel, the brake pedal, the accelerator, the indicator (and perhaps the clutch and gear lever) as you take your vehicle through an intersection....

Request

The story began last December, when a good friend asked me to join him in an overseas venture to explain how I make sermons. His argument: in his land there are many preachers who are biblically faithful in their theology, but they have never learned how to make a sermon. They settle on some message they think their congregation needs (for example, God blesses an honest day's labor), work it out, find some illustrations to support the message, then find a text of Scripture on which to hang the message, and presto – that's a sermon. Often enough their message is Scripturally true, but the Scripture itself has not been opened. How to help these men make sermons that in fact open the Scriptures?? The long and short: I found myself among brothers in a distant land, all eager to learn how they could improve their sermon making skills.

Program

Over the years some 20 sermons of mine had been translated into the language of the foreigners I visited. From these 20 or so sermons I selected 7 from different genres of Scripture (an Old Testament history text, a psalm, a wisdom passage, a prophecy, a parable, and two epistle passages). These seven sermons were made available to those who participated in the seminars so that they could see what a sermon ought to look like. For my part, I revisited the texts expounded in those sermons so as to be able to walk the brothers through the steps of sermon preparation in a live, on-the-ground manner. What I did? With the assistance of a translator, I invited the brothers on Tuesday to be flies on the wall behind my desk as I talked my way through the steps I took to prepare the sermon in their file on 1 Corinthians 1. On Wednesday I had them join me in my chair as I prepared a sermon on Exodus 3 and a second on Psalm 13; I invited them to help ask the right questions and help find the necessary answers. On Thursday I had them sit in the chair themselves while I hovered behind them to ensure they asked the text (Ecclesiastes 5) the right questions and reached responsible answers. At the end of Thursday's instruction I gave them a homework assignment: this evening they were to work through the steps necessary for making a sermon on 1 Peter 1:13ff. My translator and I would be keen to hear and discuss their product on Friday.

The steps

What did those flies on the wall hear me say? I walked the brothers through the following steps. The first two are preliminary, and should speak for themselves:

- Pray for wisdom and insight – for no finite person can bring God’s word to His people on own strength.
- Then: read the chapter carefully, as well as the surrounding chapters and perhaps the entire book. You need a bird’s eye view of the passage you wish to zero in on.

Then comes the essential, heavy lifting:

- For every sermon you make, you must find answers to the following three vital questions before you dig deeply into the chosen passage:
 - Who wrote this passage?
 - To whom was it written?
 - Why was it written?

The answers to these questions may not be one word answers (“Moses”, “the Corinthians”, “to comfort”), but need to include the actual situation of the author and the reader(s). That includes being aware of how much of Scripture the author and/or readers knew. In fact, I stressed that it was essential to put yourself in the author’s shoes as he’s writing, *and* in the reader’s shoes as they’re reading the passage (or hearing him say it). That will give color to your sermon, and help with making the application natural. This is particularly challenging when you have limited access to commentaries, etc. We do well to realize that there were many times in Church History when preacher had little more than the inspired text itself. If that’s all the Lord of the church provides in a culture or language group today, that by definition is enough for preachers in that culture. It turns out that the Bible itself tells us much more information than we tend to think on questions as those listed above, and so it’s crucial to know the Bible.

- That done, I showed the brothers how to read the passage carefully. Why did the author use *that* word (or phrase) instead of some other? How is the meaning changed if you skip that word, or replace it with a different word? How does this word or phrase or sentence contribute to the flow of the author’s argument? This process is labor intensive, for you need to ask these sorts of questions for every word, every phrase. Yet there’s no other way to get into the skin of the writer (and readers), and that’s what you need to do if you wish to pass on the message of the passage to the congregation.
- Once we’d read the entire passage this carefully, I urged the brothers to summarize to their own mind what the actual message of the passage is. That’s a process requiring thought, reflection, prayerful meditation. I told the participants that at this stage I usually do some other work, be it a visit, be it some administration, be it some recreation, be it a night’s sleep. I need time to let the study done so far percolate in my mind as I strive to put order into the abundance of details that have emerged. To put the question simply: what does the Lord say to the churches here? The answer to that question needs to be put into a single sentence. That sentence is not yet the theme of the sermon, but is a step towards that theme.
- Next, reread the entire passage and seek to find a single verse or part of a verse that catches this main message. That verse (or part thereof) becomes the *window* through which you read/explain the entire passage. Read the passage again through the perspective of that chosen window, and determine how each verse (or part) contributes to communicating that main message. Why did the author include a given sentence in his attempt to communicate his thought? How did a particular verse influence the readers’ understanding of the passage? Again, the purpose of the exercise is to force

your mind to focus on *one* message. If you don't force your mind to focus (and stay focused) on one message, your congregation will not catch a single message. If, for example, you choose to preach through the passage by explaining and commenting on each verse one after the other, you will end up with giving your congregation multiple messages to take home – and they will forget multiple messages much quicker than a single message. Besides, the author did not write Exodus 3 or 1 Peter 1 to be read as disjointed sentences but as one passage communicating a single message. So: find that message, latch on to it, and stick to it.

- The Lord Jesus Christ told us (John 5:39; Luke 24:44,45) that every word of Scripture is ultimately about Christ. A preacher is not to proclaim Moses or David or Solomon or Paul, but is to proclaim Jesus Christ crucified. So as you grapple with the passage, you need to come to grips with how this passage shows the congregation their Savior. No two passages of Scripture will reveal the Savior in exactly the same way. As you prepare to preach on your chosen passage, you must discover how the passage points to Christ's work.
- Similarly, the Holy Spirit told us that though the Bible was written long ago in a foreign language and culture, each passage is directed to the today's Christians (see 1 Corinthians 10:11; 2 Timothy 3:16,17). So the preacher has to consider how his chosen passage is profitable for the congregation he's serving. Just how does this passage comfort or instruct or admonish today's congregation? The preacher must have an answer before he begins writing his sermon. The answer may not be an (artificial) add-on to the explanation of the passage, but needs to flow out of the passage itself. Understanding the author's and/or the readers' circumstances will go a long way to coming to the application the Lord intends.
- Now prepare a concise theme for your sermon. This theme has to catch the central thought you've seen in the passage, and is the ripe fruit on your reflection on that message. At the same time it will serve to the congregation as a coat hanger upon which they can hang the details of the sermon they'll be hearing.
- Then prepare an outline of your sermon. That outline will produce a series of points that will help the congregation know where you're going. Typically, I told the brothers, my points cover, in some way and order (and with different wording), the following: what did the author say, why did he say it, and so what.
- Once the outline is complete, I urged the brothers to write out their sermon from beginning to end. Though it's again time consuming, the exercise is essential because it compels you to lay every link carefully from A to Z. If something is not clear in your own head, it will never become clear to the congregation! Since you are speaking on behalf of the King of kings, your material has to be as clear as possible. In the service to the King, nothing but the best!

Results

So there you have it. Like I said, I went through four sermons with the brothers to show how the method worked, giving them increased participation as we went along. As the process unfolded, the room increasingly filled with excitement and enthusiasm as the brothers caught the method. One brother put it this way: I've been preaching all these years, and never had a method – finally I have it! And it showed. On Friday most of the seminar participants presented the work they'd done for a potential sermon on 1 Peter 1. What we heard filled us with gratitude; these men had caught onto a method and were actually letting the Scriptures speak for themselves! The experience was so encouraging, so humbling....

Now what?

I went back home, back to my own sermon preparations. The brothers of that foreign land returned to their charges. Now comes the hard part for them: in the pressures of their daily tasks they need to do the demanding work of reading carefully what the Spirit says to the churches and then communicating that properly. For the short haul, it's a lot easier to talk off the top of your head.... I assured the brothers that we'd pray for them. I'm also confident that the Lord will provide continued opportunities for others to keep encouraging them in how to make text-driven and Christ-centered sermons. Every land in the Lord's vast world needs *the Word* as much as Canada does.

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