



## **Christian Preaching: An Introduction (2)**

**Sermon Purpose**

## **Recap:**

In the previous session, we concentrated on the definition of preaching. This emphasized that the 'content' of preaching, 'what' is to be said, is derived from the Christian Scriptures. This being the case it is necessary to study the specific biblical passage we are going to preach from understanding first, 'what it meant in context' and then 'what it means in the context' in which the message is going to be delivered. To put this simply, the content of preaching is determined by our study of the Scriptures.

Of course, what we include in our sermon and how our sermon is shaped requires some decisions and organising.

In this session, our focus will be upon the shaping of our material, our content, our message, based upon the material our study has revealed in relation to the issues of preaching 'purpose' and sermon 'form'.

## **Activity:**

Think of a sermon you recently preached or heard preached. What do you think its purpose was, what were you or the preacher trying to do through this sermon?

## **Sermon Purpose**

The 'purpose' of a sermon is what you hope to achieve through preaching the sermon, to put that differently, what do you want the sermon to 'do'. Of course, God can and may bring about results from your sermon that you did not anticipate but that is God's work. Instead, what we are concentrating on here is what we hope the sermon will do.

To some people this question of purpose might seem self-evident – you aim to teach people what the bible says. Indeed, to be sure, in every and any sermon we will wish to communicate biblical teaching but – why this teaching on this day and for what purpose?

Haddon Robinson writes:

'No matter how brilliant or biblical a sermon is, without a definite purpose it is not worth preaching. We have no adequate idea of why we are speaking...The purpose states what you expect to happen in your hearers as a result of preaching your sermon'.

Haddon Robinson, *Expository Preaching: Principles & Practice*, Rev ed. (Nottingham: IVP, 2001), pp. 106-107.

## **Activity:**

As previously noted in session 1 the content of our Christian preaching is Scripture. Consider 12 Timothy 3:14-17

<sup>14</sup> But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup> and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup> All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Write down the various purposes that Scripture can affect.

### **Input:**

Of course, because we are preaching Scripture and Scripture can affect a number of purposes so can any particular sermon as it deals with such Scripture. This said, for text-specific preaching concerned with 'the communication of a biblical concept' or with 'Discovering the word of the Lord from the Bible, for this group of people, at this particular time' having a clear purpose for the sermon can help focus both the organisation of the content and the nature of the delivery.

The following four purposes can be helpful in this process of organisation and delivery. They are phrased not in terms of what the preacher is doing – but in terms of desired outcome. E.g. the purpose of a 'teaching' sermon is only really achieved if people 'learn something'.

Here are four possible general sermon purposes:

1. That people 'learn' something – about a passage, a doctrine, a truth etc.
2. That people 'do' something – a sermon aimed at behavioural action and change
3. That people 'experience' something – hope, the love of God, the grace of God
4. That people 'believe' something – preaching as persuasion such as in but not limited to evangelistic preaching.

### Three important things to note:

All of these sermons will involve biblical 'content' but the goals in all of them will not primarily be 'learning about'.

To be sure there are some overlaps and a person may wish to do several things in a sermon but the danger in too many purposes is that we might achieve no purpose at all. Sometimes too many purposes indicate no clear purpose and if you aim at nothing there is a chance you might hit it!

A range of purposes will be achieved through a range of sermons in that place no one sermon needs to try and do everything for a group of people.

### **Activity:**

Write down things you think may impact the purpose of any particular sermon.

### **Input:**

There are a variety of factors that may impact the purpose of any particular sermon and sometimes a final sermon purpose will be a negotiation between several of these:

- a) What a Scripture passage says, its content.
- b) What a Scripture passage is doing – On this Haddon Robinson states:

‘How then do you determine the purpose of your sermon? You do so by discovering the purpose behind the passage you are preaching. As part of your exegesis, you should ask, “Why did the author write this? What effect did he expect it to have on readers?”’

If a text in its context was designed to ‘encourage you may indeed decide that the purpose of your sermon is that people ‘learn about’ encouragement. You may, however, decide that your purpose is not so much that people will ‘learn about’ encouragement but ‘experience’ or actually go and encourage. Again of course there is overlap and you will use much of the same material but these purposes are different.

- c) Context in which you will preach:

Including...

- i. The specific known needs of a congregation and or their demographics (interpreting the congregation)
- ii. Any specific Church or national or local dates of significance e.g. Advent, or Remembrance Sunday (wider context)
- iii. The focus of the service or event at which you are asked to speak.
- iv. Where the sermon comes in the service.

A preacher needs to bear in mind all of these different factors of the context in which you will preach. Sometimes you will have to negotiate between them as there can be many demands on a single worship service not least when and where there may be: an infant dedication, or the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, or has been a recent death among the congregation. All of these factors impact the context. Knowing as much as you can about the context is important.

Special events may mean that there are more visitors than usual. A recent bereavement may mean that some normally okay humour may not be appropriate on that day. This is not about the offence of the Gospel but about the offence of careless words through a failure to know the context.

These features about context remind us of the important fact that most of our preaching takes place to a congregation gathered in worship.

### **Preaching with Purpose in the Context of Worship**

Not all preaching, biblically or historically takes place in the context of a congregation gathered in a 'worship service'. This said, the vast majority of preaching in the global North today takes place in such a context: a congregation gathered in a worship event.

#### **Activity:**

Think about a recent sermon you preached or heard. Where did it come in the order of service? How long was given to the preaching in relation to the other acts of worship. In what ways was the content of the sermon related to the other acts of worship that took place? To what extent do you think that the other aspects of worship as they were carried out aided or distracted from the sermon achieving its purpose?

#### **Input:**

Preaching which takes place within the context of a congregation gathered in worship has a certain tradition, familiarity, and expectation associated with it. The different placing and or style of preaching in different Church traditions is often related to theological as practical issues.

Historically in evangelical protestant churches preaching has been given importance both in relation to the time given to it and its place in the sermon. (This may be less so now in some contexts). One danger of making the sermon important, however, can be to treat the other parts of the worship service as 'less important, as the 'preliminaries'. This need not be the case. Rather, the preaching can be regarded as an important part of the service in relation to and interaction with the other parts of a worship service.

Preaching in the context of worship means that the 'sermon' itself does not need to be the place when and where all of the different demands on a service have to be met. Some local, national, and international issues can be dealt with appropriately in other parts of the service, such as in prayer.

Preaching in the context of worship also means that the 'sermon' itself does not need to bear the 'full weight' of the message but can be supported by the accompanying other acts and activities.

In a well-integrated service the various ingredients should work together in terms of the 'theme' of the service but also in terms of the flow of the service and this takes us back to purpose and point c) iv. above. If your sermon is going to have an emphasis of 'go out now and evangelize' it is good that it comes near the end of the service perhaps with only a song or hymn reinforcing that theme before people leave. The purpose and the placing fit. On the other hand, if your sermon requires according to purpose a follow up time of either sung worship, or quiet confession, or ministry prayer, then it is better coming earlier with these acts and activities later. Place and purpose in the worship service can help or work against one another. I have seen evangelistic services run over time, offer an appeal, and then have to struggle with the fact that people's transport is leaving!

You will not always have control over the order of a service but at least try and give some thought to how your purpose can be best fulfilled in the order where the preaching has been placed.

Sermon purpose and worship service purpose, at best, work together.

***Please note: These notes were prepared by Dr. Stuart Blythe Associate Professor in the John Gladstone Chair of Preaching and Worship, Acadia Divinity College, Wolfville, for the SBLPA. These are for the personal use of SBLPA members and should not be reproduced or distributed without permission.***