



Christian Preaching: An Introduction (3)

Sermon Form

Recap

In session 1 we concentrated on what it means to try and understand what a biblical passage in its context (text in context) actually meant and thus what it means as we apply it into our context today (preaching context). Studying the Scriptures will actually provide us with a lot of information which we will wish to share but a sermon has a limited period of time. We need, therefore to make decisions about what to include and what to exclude. One of the important ways to do this is by giving attention to the 'purpose' of our sermon.

In session 2, therefore, we looked at the importance of sermon purpose to bring focus to our preaching. Four general purposes were suggested which can in turn be broken down into a variety of more specific purposes e.g. the purpose that people might 'learn something' can be narrowed more specifically to a myriad of possibilities as wide as the Scriptures themselves but still have the general purpose that at the end of the service people will not simply have heard but actually 'learned something'. The content and purpose of the Scripture passage we are preaching from should be a main guide in determining our sermon purpose. Yet, this specific Scripture has to be delivered to a specific congregation in a specific space and time and usually within an order of service. We preach the text but in context and this context may also impact our sermon purpose.

In organising our biblical content to preach with respect to our purpose and important factor in sermon design is therefore the sermon 'structure' or the sermon 'form'. The sermon form is basically the way in which we organise our materials so that we communicate the content in a way that helps us achieve the purpose of our sermon. Again, to be sure God does what God will with our preaching. This indeed is God's part. We are not denying that here at all. We are simply looking at our part so that we can offer the best we can through and into the energising power of the Holy Spirit.

Activity:

Think of a sermon you recently preached or heard (if need be listen to one online). Can you identify the way in which the material was organized? Was the sermon form explicit, e.g. highlighted by the preacher (My first heading...etc.) or was it implicit, not stated but as you reflect apparent. In what ways did you find the sermon form helpful and or unhelpful, in getting the message.

Input:

People talk about sermon 'structure', 'form', 'design' and 'shape' to discuss the way in which a sermon is organised to be delivered. Many people stereotypically identify preaching with an introduction, three points, and a conclusion. The fact is, however, throughout history and into the present Christian preaching has been expressed in a large variety of 'forms'.

Activity:

Think of a sermon you have recently preached, why did you choose that particular form? Try and be as honest as you can about the reasons.

Input:

The form of a sermon for a particular sermon can be shaped and influenced by many factors:

Tradition – what has been done and is expected in a congregation

Learned – how we were taught to preach or how we have learned from hearing others preach

Personality and Preference – what actually comes naturally to us and what we like when we listen to sermons

Wider Culture – attempts to communicate in a multi-media society (wide spread use of PowerPoint and or multi-media illustrations)

None of the above are necessarily bad and if we desire to preach in context we at least need to think about how our preaching relates to these. Simple advice – if a congregation is traditionally used to receiving a 15 minutes sermon, they often do not respond well, no matter how much you might feel it is good for them, to a 45 minutes sermon. They are not used to it and it creates a dissonance in their usual receiving. You are preaching against their ‘tradition’ in this context.

Other very important factors will be:

Scripture Text – the message of Scripture comes to us in a variety of literary form. This can have significance not only for how we interpret the passage but how we shape the sermon on that passage.

Sermon Purpose – the way in which we shape the sermon should aid the goal that we have for that sermon.

Sermon Forms; Deductive and Inductive

It can be argued that there are two basic approaches to sermon form: deductive and inductive.

John McClure helpfully defines these as follows:

Deductive sermon – ‘A sermon that develops from the presentation of a general truth to its division, application, and illustrative support’.

Inductive sermon – ‘A form of preaching in which the preacher delays the full statement of the sermon theme or idea’.

John S McClure, *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics* (London: WJKP, 2007), 20, 62.

Traditionally for many people the form of preaching they are used to hearing and delivering are ‘deductive sermons’.

These are not necessarily the only, nor the best form, of preaching for all purposes. BUT this has been the form followed and adopted by many gifted, experienced, and ‘successful’ preachers.

In the rest of this session we will consider a ‘deductive’ approach to sermon ‘form’ as a primary approach to be learned and practiced.

Deductive Preaching and the ‘Big Idea’

In deductive preaching the preacher **draws from the passage** a central idea that holds the sermon together. In the introduction to the sermon this idea is introduced and then developed in usually between two and four progressive stages before being drawn together in a conclusion.

This approach can indeed be associated with the approach of Haddon Robinson whose definition we looked at in Session 1. Look back at that definition.

Robinson talks about preachers finding the ‘Big Idea’ in a passage which is then explored in various sections. (what follows is my take on this approach). The ‘Big Idea’ can indeed be an idea a doctrine, a concept, an argument. BUT it should clearly and specifically come from the ‘text in context’, the Scripture being preached.

Very simply such a sermon form will look like this:

Introduction: Big Idea (or Concept, Argument)

Stage 1 Idea explored and expanded (and applied)

Stage 2 Idea explored and expanded (and applied)

Stage 3 Idea explored and expanded (and applied)

Conclusion (recap or application depending upon what has happened in previous stages).

Yet several **VERY important** things need to be said about this approach.

First, the Big Idea should come from the Scripture passage and be specifically related to what that passage is actually about.

This is to return to the point in Session 1 about Mark 2:1-12. This is not a passage about 'forgiveness' in general, or even initially about forgiveness through Jesus's death on the cross. Rather this is a passage about forgiveness given in the conflict of a situation of healing about the authority of Jesus'. Perhaps then the Big Idea might be 'the authority to forgive sins' or 'healing and forgiveness' or the argument 'Yes, Jesus has the authority to forgive sins',

In this approach to preaching the 'Big Idea' needs to come specifically from the passage following personal study, the use of commentaries, and prayer.

Second, the Big Idea needs to be clearly communicated to the congregation in the introduction. If this is not the case, the argued strength of this approach, which is clarity in communication, will be lost.

Activity: Think back to a recent sermon you have heard or preached. What was its 'Big Idea'? Was it clear? Was it specific?

Deductive Preaching and the Stages

In this approach to preaching the stages explore and expand upon the Big Idea with primary reference to the passage being preached from.

There are **three real dangers** with this form of preaching that need to be avoided.

The first danger is that the preacher preaches 3 or 4 separate sermons. That is the preacher does not keep the focus on the stages in developing the Big Idea but instead discusses separate areas of interest in the passage without them flowing out of or into the main idea they have introduced. The approach I am describing here **is not the same** as saying there are three or four things from this passage that I want to talk about. It is rather an approach that seeks to say this is what this passage is about and expanding and explaining that in more detail.

The second danger, related to the first, but slightly different is that the 'stages' do not stay focussed on the content of the passage. That is, while a Big Idea is identified in the passage the sections are not really drawn from the passage but 'jump' off the passage into the preacher's favourite themes.

In response to both the above dangers – in designing your sermon you should keep asking two questions:

1. Are my sections developments of the 'Big Idea'.
2. Am I preaching from this passage as I develop the 'Big Idea'.

A different way of describing the above is to say – ‘preach the text’ and an image for this approach might be that the sections of the sermon should be like the branches of a tree – clearly connected to the main idea which itself is deeply rooted in the passage. This is good ‘text in context’ and ‘text into context’ preaching.

Activity: Reflect upon a sermon you have recently heard or preached – were the various parts clearly and demonstrably in the sermon connected to the ‘Big Idea’ and to the Scripture passage? How could this have been improved?

The third danger is to turn this ‘form’ into a ‘one approach’ stereotype.

It may be that what has been described appears like a three point’ sermon with alliterated sub points...e.g. In this passage of Scripture, we see: The Presence of God, the Power of God, the Passion of God.

To be sure this may be a valid approach IF – the sub sections are clearly related to the ‘Big Idea’ and the subsections including the headings naturally come from the passage, and if this way of shaping and communicating the sermon aid achieving the purpose. **If this is not the case such sermons become a caricature of this type of deductive preaching and as such do not represent the approach of the ‘greats’ who may have preached in this way.**

The good news is that there can be a variety of approaches using a ‘deductive form and these should be used as they aid the delivery of the sermon in context. I give two variations below.

First in this approach, the stages can be used progressively to develop and argument rather than as it were to simply state three or four dimensions of the ‘Big Idea’. In this approach, they will have a progressive and cumulative development, each building upon the other in a logical way. In this approach, the argument will be the ‘Big Idea’ introduced through the introduction.

Second, rather than points with alliterated words the stages can be introduced with headings that continually draw the listeners into the ‘exposition’ and indeed application that is taking place. So, for example, John N Gladstone, minister of Yorkminster Park Baptist Church in Toronto when preaching on 1 Corinthians 3: 5-6 in a sermon entitled: ‘When Love Reaches Maturity’ developed the sermon with the headings: A mature Christian Love (the Big Idea) Is Never Selfish, Is Never Malicious, Is Never Touchy.

Deductive sermon forms are a good place to start in preaching. They gain strength when they are clearly related to the Scriptures and directed towards the achieving of the sermons purpose. This takes time and skill to develop and you should constantly reflect upon your sermons to ensure that they are doing this.

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