

How to Structure a Sermon

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The preacher was a well-respected pulpiteer. The sermon was doctrinally sound. He seemed to preach with sincerity, reverence, and passion. But the sermon felt like we were driving on a flat tire.

What went wrong?

At the end of the service, the friend sitting next to me leaned over and said, “He had four alliterated points with three sub-points each. I don’t care what you say, he had sixteen points!”

Yep. That’s what went wrong.

A good sermon has purpose, unity, and movement. Well-crafted structure makes this possible. But an overcooked structure messes up the whole meal. On the other hand, a lack of structure produces wishy-washy preaching. It is all over the place, hard to follow, with no clear destination.

The bottom-line is that sermon structure is important. But the preacher must keep structure in its place. To put it somewhat crudely, sermon structure should be like underwear. It should provide support. But it shouldn’t show!

How should you structure the sermon for effective preaching?

Structure the Sermon Based on the Text

Something drives every sermon. Every sermon should be driven by the word of God. It is manipulative to get a sermon idea and then find a text to support it. You should begin with a biblical text and let the text set the agenda for the sermon. Don’t read the text only to abandon it. Let the text saturate the sermon. The main idea of the text should be the main idea of the sermon. The content of the text should shape the structure of the sermon. The text should determine how you outline the sermon. Build your sermon on the foundation of authorial intent. Be able to say, “The Bible says...” not “I think the text suggests...”

Structure the Sermon Around a Big Idea

An effective sermon is about one thing. It may be a long passage. There may be multiple points. The sermon may be busy. But you can hold the congregation’s attention if the message is united around one big idea. There are many applications of a text. But there is only one proper interpretation. Dig until you find the God-intended meaning of the text. Then build your sermon around the point of the text. This is arguably the hardest part of sermon preparation. But the labor is worth it. Work to state the point of the sermon in a clear, active, present tense sentence. Then structure the sermon around that big idea.

Structure the Sermon for Clear Communication

I have a book of sermons the author claims is not a book of sermons. He calls the chapters of the book “sermon transcripts.” His reasoning is that sermons are oral, not written. I fully agree. It is good for preachers to write complete sermon manuscripts. But the manuscript is not a sermon. It only becomes a sermon when you preach it. The manuscript is only a means to an end. Think about those who will hear the sermon as you write. Write for the ear, not the eye. Strive to be clear, not deep. Deep preachers are incomprehensible. Clear preachers are compelling.

Structure the Sermon for the Time Allotted

Preparing to preach involves both Bible study and sermon preparation. Don’t cheat either part of the process. As you study the text, do a good job. If you diligently study the text, you will inevitably have more material than you can preach in one sermon. This is why sermon preparation is so essential. It would be great if the congregation let your preach until you got tired. They won’t. You will only have a limited amount of time to preach what the Lord has taught you in private. Be a good steward of the time you have to preach. Don’t be a data dump. Keep the main thing the main thing. Edit out unnecessary words, statements, and ideas. Structure the sermon to use the time you have to preach wisely.

Structure the Sermon to Call for a Verdict

Watching a cooking show does not require you to cook anything. Scanning the TV guide does not compel you to watch a show. But every encounter with the word of God demands a personal response. We do not preach to inform, impress, or entertain. We preach as ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore men on Christ’s behalf to be reconciled with God. The evidence for the gospel demands a verdict. Preaching calls for that verdict. What are you trying to do to the people who hear you preach? What should they know and do after hearing this sermon? What are you doing in the sermon to lead to that destination? Structure the sermon with a logical progression that leads to a spiritual verdict of repentance, faith, and obedience.

How do you structure your sermon?