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# EXPOSITOR

A PUBLICATION OF  
ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

WINTER 2023

*No. 41*

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WHAT  
*is a*  
SERMON?

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## A JOY THAT CANNOT BE SHAKEN

### REJOICE IN THE LORD

with Steven Lawson

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# THE NATURE OF A SERMON

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES



**I**t has been well said that preaching is better caught than it is taught. There is much truth in that axiom. As expositors, we are greatly influenced by other preachers we have heard—perhaps more so than many of us realize. In large measure, our understanding of preaching is significantly shaped by other men we have heard in the pulpit.

This is especially true when it comes to grasping the nature of a sermon. Most preachers replicate what they have observed in other pulpit ministries. This can be a good thing. But it can also be an unhelpful or limiting influence. It is thus critically important that each of us gives careful attention to what constitutes

the kind of sermon that meets God's standard for effective preaching.

In this issue of *Expositor* magazine, we will consider the key components of a genuine sermon. Likewise, we will consider what a sermon is not. This will be strategically important for your pulpit ministry. You must know what marks an authentic sermon before you can prepare one.

Our desire is that this issue will refresh and direct your thinking regarding the essential hallmarks of an effective sermon. This is a fundamental matter before us that demands the fixed attention of every preacher. ♦

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven J. Lawson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.



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# WHAT IS A SERMON?

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STEVEN J. LAWSON

**B**efore we can properly prepare a sermon, we must first know what one is. We must know what the standard is before we can meet it.

Most preachers construct their sermons based upon the examples they have heard or the messages they have read. That can be good—or misguided—depending upon what kind of influences have been brought to bear upon them.

It is critically important that we know the essential elements of an effective sermon before we can rightly assemble one. It is possible to have a head full of Bible knowledge and a strategic grasp of systematic theology and yet not know how to assemble a powerful sermon. On the other end of the spectrum, it is quite possible to know less Scripture and still be a powerful force in the pulpit. How is this so? The latter knows

the key elements of a sermon and can effectively deliver it.

John Owen, the renowned Puritan theologian, was once asked by King Charles II why he—the vice-regent of Oxford University—traveled to hear the uneducated John Bunyan preach. After all, Bunyan, the tinker of Bedford, was untaught and unlettered. The brilliant Owen responded, “I would exchange all my learning if I could possess the tinker’s ability to grip men’s hearts.” While Owen had a stronger grasp of theology, even he recognized that Bunyan knew more about powerful preaching.

It does not matter how much you know if you cannot package it into an effective expository sermon. A preacher’s accumulated knowledge of the Bible is of little value if he cannot skillfully put it into practice in the pulpit. It does not matter if you have gone to Bible

college or seminary if you cannot organize what you have learned into a cohesive and impactful message. It does not matter how many books you have read or how large your personal library is if you cannot assemble a compelling sermon. Your access to a vast amount of information does not guarantee success.

We must be able to transfer what we have studied in Scripture into a sermon that will accomplish its intended purpose. We need to learn how to assemble a sermon if we are to preach to people effectively. In order to address this, we will consider three vital facets: what a sermon is not, what a sermon is, and what a sermon does.

### WHAT A SERMON IS NOT

We must first know what a sermon is not before we can know what one is. J. Gresham Machen writes, “Ninety percent of a definition is by negation.” Machen means that we have to use negative denial before we can use positive assertion. That being so, this is where we will start our analysis of a sermon—with what it is *not*.

A sermon is not a term paper submitted to a professor in stiff, formal language. It is not an exegetical digest crafted with dense, technical words. It is not a classroom lecture in which the goal is merely the transfer of information from one mind to another mind. It is not an essay drafted merely to explain a

subject. It is not an editorial blog post espousing your opinion on a matter.

A sermon is not a data dump, unleashing a barrage of information. It is not an encyclopedic lesson, submitted to an editor for publication. It is not even a consecutive commentary on a passage that accurately explains what a passage means. It is not an engaging conversation, involving a lively exchange between the speaker and his listeners. It is not a group discussion that features dialogue with various people. It is not a panel discussion that allows for spontaneous answers to impromptu questions.

A sermon is not a debate, pitting two opposing parties in an argument. It is not casual conversation, sharing one’s thoughts and ideas. It is not a TED Talk, broadening the listener’s perspective on a subject. It is not a book review, summarizing the highlights of a written work. It is not a form of entertainment, holding people’s attention with levity and lightheartedness. It is not a Q&A session, allowing the listener to direct what is addressed.


Martyn Lloyd-Jones asks:

What is a sermon?

It is not running commentary on a passage.

Not a series of comments on a text.

Not a mere meandering through a number of



**We must be able to transfer  
what we have studied in  
Scripture into a sermon  
that will accomplish its  
intended purpose.**



verses.

Not a mere collection or series of excellent and true statements and remarks.

All those should be found in the sermon, but they do not constitute a sermon.

What passes for a sermon in many churches is, tragically, not one at all. The worship guide may indicate that a sermon is slated to be given. The pastor's name may be typed next to that part. The sermon title may be listed. The Scripture reference may be given. But that does not mean what will be delivered from the pulpit is an actual sermon. Tragically, many people do not hear a real sermon when they attend church.

T. David Gordon has written an insightful book, *Why Johnny Can't Preach*, that probes why what passes as a sermon in most churches is, in fact, not a sermon. He states:

In my opinion, less than thirty percent of those who are ordained to the Christian ministry can preach an even mediocre sermon... . The problem is not that we don't have "great" preachers; in many circumstances we don't even have mediocre preachers. Part of me wishes to avoid proving the sordid truth: that preaching today is ordinarily poor. And I have come to recognize that many, many individuals today have never been under a steady diet of competent preaching. As a consequence, they are satisfied with what they hear because they have nothing better with which to compare it... . I would guess that of the sermons I've heard in the last twenty-five years, fifteen percent had a discernible point... . Of those fifteen percent, however, less than ten percent demonstrably based the point on the text read.

If this assessment is anywhere close to accurate, then we need to declare a dire state of emergency in the contemporary pulpit. Preaching today is often extraordinarily average, poorly arranged, and underdeveloped, hardly resembling an authentic sermon.

## WHAT A SERMON IS

Having considered what a sermon is not, it is now

time to turn our attention to what constitutes a real sermon. A sermon is a public proclamation of the Word of God that includes the explanation of a biblical text as well as its application to the life of the listener, followed by an exhortation and appeal to act upon the truth. In order to best understand this, we should turn to Martyn Lloyd-Jones, perhaps the greatest expositor of the twentieth century.

Lloyd-Jones was, arguably, the one man most responsible for the resurgence of expository preaching in our day. After he retired from his pulpit ministry at Westminster Chapel, London, he gave a series of lectures on preaching in 1969 at Westminster Theological Seminary. He had been asked to address the subject of expository preaching.

In describing what a sermon is, Lloyd Jones states: "What makes a sermon a sermon is that it has this particular form which differentiates it from everything else." He then proceeds to use the illustration of a symphony:

I maintain that a sermon should have form in the sense that a musical symphony has form. A symphony always has form, it has its parts and its portions. The divisions are clear, and are recognised, and can be described; and yet a symphony is a whole. You can divide it into parts, and yet you always realise that they are parts of a whole, and that the whole is more than the mere summation or aggregate of the parts. One should always think of a sermon as a construction, a work which is in that way comparable to a symphony.

Lloyd-Jones explains that the parts of a sermon consist of certain basic elements that resemble the movements in a symphony. Each part is vitally important to the overall effectiveness of the whole message. He notes seven essential components that are critical to any sermon that works well.

### Explanation

Lloyd-Jones believed that everything in a sermon must begin with the Word of God. The most important part of the message is the explanation of a passage of Scripture. The preacher must always have

a specific biblical text before him for which he will give the God-intended meaning. In giving the proper interpretation of the passage, the preacher becomes simply the mouthpiece through whom God speaks in the sermon. This is because when the Bible speaks, God speaks. Lloyd-Jones describes:

You start with exposition not only in your own preparation, but you are going to give this to the people as well. What you are going to say, the burden of your message, arises from this exposition.

### **Doctrine**

After explaining the authorial intent of the passage, the preacher must find the theology in his text. Each portion of Scripture contains doctrine that must be taught in the sermon. This necessitates that the preacher is well acquainted with systematic theology. He must know its various categories if he is to detect them in his verse and be able to teach them. Lloyd-Jones explains:

If you have truly understood the verse or passage, you will arrive at a doctrine, a particular doctrine, which is part of the whole message of the Bible. It is your business to search for this and to seek it diligently. You have to question your text, to put questions to it, and especially this question—What is the particular doctrine here, the special message? In the preparation of a sermon nothing is more important than that.

What is preaching?... It is theology on fire. And a theology which does not take fire, I maintain, is a defective theology; or at least the man's understanding of it is defective. Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire.

### **Relevance**

Lloyd-Jones also believed that the preacher must show the relevance of the passage for daily Christian living. The preacher must spell out the application, demonstrating how these truths are to be lived out. He must seek to move the listener to pursue the appropriate course of action:

Having isolated your doctrine in this way and, having got it quite clear in your own mind, you then proceed to consider the relevance of this particular doctrine to the people who are listening to you. This question of relevance must never be forgotten. As I have said, you are not lecturing, you are not reading an essay; you are setting out to do something definite and particular, to influence these people and the whole of their lives and outlook. Obviously, therefore, you have got to show the relevance of all this. You are not an antiquary lecturing on ancient history or on ancient civilisations, or something like that. The preacher is a man who is speaking to people who are alive today and confronted by the problems of life; and therefore you have to show that this is not some academic or theoretical matter which may be of interest to people who take up that particular hobby, as others take up crossword puzzles or something of that type. You are to show that this message is vitally important for them, and that they must listen with the whole of their being, because this really is going to help them to live.

### **Divisions**

Lloyd-Jones understood that a sermon must be divided into complementary parts. These are shown by headings or propositions. These divisions help the preacher teach the passage in a logical manner and stay on message. Moreover, they help the listener follow his flow of thought as he unfolds the text being addressed:

Having done that, you now come to the division of this matter into propositions or headings or heads—whatever you may like to call them. The object of these headings or divisions is to make clear this central doctrine or proposition. But there is a definite form to all this.

### **Theme**

Lloyd-Jones understood that every sermon should have one dominant theme. Every sermon should be a one-point sermon. A sermon may have multiple headings, but there must be one overarching, central

idea. This central idea should be announced at the outset of the sermon in the introduction:

The preacher should indicate the main theme and its various divisions in his general introduction. He must then work these out in detail and in order in his sermon. So that matter is to be divided up in this way into a number of subordinate propositions.

The arrangement of these propositions or heads is a very important matter. Having divided up the theme, and having seen its respective elements, you do not now place these haphazardly in any sort of order.

### **Order**

Lloyd-Jones believed that the sequence of thought in a sermon is important to its effectiveness. There is an unfolding progression of thought—a logical sequence or natural development of the truths

being presented—that every message must have and demonstrate. He states:

Each [heading] should lead to the next, and work ultimately to a definite conclusion. Everything is to be so arranged as to bring out the main thrust of this particular doctrine.

### **Argument**

Lloyd-Jones rightly perceived that every sermon must have a building argument that convinces the listener of the truth of the passage. It is this argument that makes the message powerfully persuasive in the mind and heart of the listener. In this sense, the preacher is much like a lawyer who presents his case in an attempt to win a favorable verdict from the listeners:

You have a doctrine, an argument, a case which you want to argue out, and to reason, and to develop with the people.



## Conclusion

Lloyd-Jones understood that the well-developed sermon must lead to a strong conclusion. Rather than tapering off, the message should conclude with a crescendo that drives home the main thrust of the sermon:

You must end on a climax, and everything should lead up to it in such a way that the great truth stands out, dominating everything that has been said, and the listeners go away with this in their minds.

Lloyd-Jones summarizes what he understands the essence of a sermon to be. He speaks of its unique form and definite shape. One must have a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes a sermon before one can prepare and deliver it. He explains:

This is my idea of a sermon, and that is what I mean when I stress this idea of the form. You do not stop at mere exposition or explanation of the meaning of the text. You do that, you have got to do that, but what you are concerned to do is to convey its message. In other words, a sermon is an entity, it is a complete whole. This must always be true of a sermon; it must always have its completeness, this form.

Given this understanding of what a sermon is, Lloyd-Jones recognizes the demanding challenge before the preacher that accompanies this pursuit:

The preparation of sermons involves sweat and labour. It can be extremely difficult at times to get all this matter that you have found in Scriptures into this particular form. It is like a potter fashioning something out of clay, or like a blacksmith making shoes for a horse; you have to keep on putting the material into the fire and onto the anvil and hit it again and again with the hammer. Each time it is a bit better, but not quite right; so you put it back again and again until you are satisfied with it or can do no better.

This is the most gruelling part of the preparation of a sermon; but at the same time it is a most fascinating and most glorious occupation.

It can be at times most difficult, most exhausting, most trying. But at the same time I can assure you that when you have finally succeeded you will experience one of the most glorious feelings that ever comes to a man on the face of the earth.

## WHAT A SERMON DOES

Every sermon must be active, never passive. You must never adopt a “take-it-or-leave-it” approach in delivering the message. Instead, a sermon must aim at acting upon an individual with a force that moves him in a direction closer to God and to pursue His will. It can never be delivered in a nonchalant manner, but rather seeks to capture the whole person of the listener—mind, heart, and will.

## INADEQUATE UNDERSTANDING

We first want to expose some flawed perceptions of what a sermon is intended to do. We must be mindful that there are pulpit ministries that fall short of the biblical standard. This involves “preaching” that addresses only one part of the listener, whether it be exclusively the mind, merely the emotions, or simply the will. Such a one-dimensional approach to the sermon will have a limited effect upon those who sit under its delivery. Let us consider each of these areas and the result it will produce.


### Only Addressing the Mind

If you only address the mind of the listener, you are not fulfilling your role as a preacher. You are a teacher, yes, but not a preacher—at least not according to the biblical standard. An overly cognitive sermon makes you merely a lecturer. A lecturer is greatly needed in a classroom. But if he is there to deliver a lecture, he should be barred from entering the pulpit.

An exclusive emphasis on reaching the intellect of the listener turns the church into a school. It reduces the congregation into a student body. It lowers the sanctuary into a study hall. It changes the pulpit into a podium. It makes the Bible a mere academic textbook. It substitutes transformation for information.

In turn, this kind of a lecture that masquerades as a sermon produces a certain kind of church. Its members are very knowledgeable but have little heart. They are a congregation ready to argue over

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the smallest point of a third-level doctrine. When they meet someone, they have an eagle eye to spot the points of doctrinal disagreement but are blind to areas of common agreement. They are more motivated to win an argument than win a soul to Christ.

#### **Only Addressing the Emotions**

If you only appeal to the affections of the listener, you are not a preacher. You are a devotional speaker, a motivational speaker, or a life coach. Or worse, you are an entertainer, desiring the spotlight. But if you only appeal to the emotions, you are a cheerleader, not a preacher.

The man who delivers this kind of hyperemotional sermon may fill the building, but he will never fill the

pulpit. He has turned the worship center into a pep rally. He has transformed the sanctuary into a stage for his performances. His goal is to motivate and mesmerize the people but not to mature them. He hypes the congregation but never humbles them. He entertains them but does not edify or equip them—he dazzles them but never develops them.

With this kind of an emotion-driven sermon, the people are left to live their Christian life vicariously through the personal experiences of the preacher. Everyone can relate to him, but as individuals they may not know how to rely upon God. This leaves them to live co-dependently, relying upon the preacher, not upon Christ. In the end, such preaching often produces a congregation of largely unconverted church

attenders—spectators, not servants.

### Only Addressing the Will

If you only address the will, you are not a preacher. You are a manipulator. And you are probably legalistic. You impose your personal preferences as though they are divine precepts. Such a preacher is more known for what he is against than for what he is for. He deals in the sensational, not the scriptural.

This man certainly preaches a sermon that is not broader than the Bible. But sadly, it is narrower than revealed truth. He mistakes uniformity in the church for unity. He bypasses the mind and the heart of the people, aiming only for their will. Rather than instruct their minds and excite their hearts, he twists their arms to conform to his view of spirituality. He is a modern-day version of the Pharisees. He stresses external religion over an internal relationship with God.

The result of this kind of preaching is a congregation conformed into the preacher's dynamic image but not into the divine image of Christ. The influence he exerts in his pulpit is the projection of his personality but not the importation of his spirituality.

### COMPREHENSIVE UNDERSTANDING

A true sermon addresses the whole person—mind, emotions, and will. A sermon drives the listener to know something, to feel something, to do something. A sermon should instruct the mind, ignite the heart, and direct the will. A sermon should cause the listener to learn the truth, love the truth, live the truth. It should address the head theologically, the heart devotionally, and the hands practically. It should cause people to think distinctly, feel deeply, and live differently. It should affect people intellectually, emotionally, and volitionally.

### Instruct the Mind

Every effective sermon must begin with teaching Scripture to the mind of the listener. Until the truth has been taught, one cannot properly respond to God. This exposition of Scripture must be the first objective of every sermon. We start with expounding the truth of Scripture to the congregation. This is always the first order of business—what does the Bible teach?

The preacher has nothing to say apart from the Word of God.

This is because we are persuaded that the Bible is “inspired by God” (2 Tim 3:16) and “proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4). The Word of God is pure, unadulterated truth, inerrant, without any errors or flaws (John 17:17), and infallible in its every detail (Matt 5:18). The Scripture is all-sufficient, able to do anything that God desires to do in salvation and sanctification (2 Tim 3:17).

The clear teaching of the written Word of God must be the starting point and the most prominent feature in every sermon. It is the exposition of Scripture that reveals the mind of God to those who hear us. The Word makes known the unchanging truth of God in a dark world of deceptions and lies. It is “the word of life” (Phil 2:16) that the psalmist says is “a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps 119:105). It is milk for the soul (1 Pet 2:2) and solid food (1 Cor 3:2; Heb 5:13) that builds strong faith and produces spiritual maturity.

This is why our sermons, first and foremost, must be saturated with teaching the truths of Scripture. A sermon without a heavy emphasis upon Scripture is one in name only, but not in reality. A sermon without Scripture from beginning to end is like a dried-up river without water or a barren meal without food. It may have the external form, but the essential reality is not there.

### Ignite the Heart

A true sermon must plunge deeper than merely the mind of your listeners. It must also plunge into the depths of their hearts. Your sermon must seek to move the emotions of those who hear it. The truth you proclaim should cause their spirits to rise and their feelings to soar. There is no virtue in a dull, flat message. Your excitement for the Word must come through in your presentation of its truth. It is not just what you say, but how you say it, that counts.

Enthusiasm in the pulpit is contagious, and like a wildfire, it soon spreads to the pew. The goal of your sermon should be to intentionally seek to excite the affections of your listeners for the greatness of God. You should desire to cause them to be filled with holy fear for Him. You should want to cause them to feel a

sense of bewilderment at the suffering of Christ upon the cross. You should purpose for them to feel sorrow over their sin.

This response is something that only the Holy Spirit can cause to happen. We do not want to manipulate the emotions of our congregation. We are utterly dependent upon the Spirit to produce such effects. But the Spirit works through means, and that includes a sermon that is aimed not only at the head, but also at the heart. You should know human nature and those elements that raise the affections of people. You should be careful to target the emotions after you have instructed the mind. It is the truth in the head that should pierce the heart and move the inner person with a flood of emotions.


### **Invite the Will**

A sermon is never complete until the will has been addressed. A message from Scripture should always point out action steps and urge the listener to pursue them. A sermon that doesn't summon the will is like a bridge that spans a chasm but is not connected to the other side. The instructions in our sermon should always lead to exhortations that call for a response. The goal of our preaching is not merely to impart information to minds. Nor is it to fill notebooks with sermon notes. Our goal is the transformation of lives, and this requires that we encourage people to take action.

In many sections of the Bible, indicatives are followed by imperatives—and always in that order. This is how the book of Romans is written. The first eleven chapters of this epistle feature the teaching of sound doctrine. But when Paul comes to chapter 12, he makes a noticeable shift and shows how this truth is to be lived. The book of Ephesians is structured the same way. The first three chapters contain doctrinal foundations, and the last three chapters describe how this doctrine is to be lived out.

The progression of your sermons should follow the pattern of the Bible itself. First, you should expound the meaning of a passage and teach the doctrine that is found in it. Then, you should desire for this truth to affect the emotions of your listeners, seeking to convict or comfort, confront or console, depending upon where that person is and what his or her needs are. Finally, you should summon their will, urging their response to the truth presented to them.

In considering what a sermon is, it is critical that we survey these most basic elements. Before we can construct a sermon, we have needed this basic understanding of what one is. The only person who addresses the mind, affections, and will is the expository preacher. He alone addresses the whole person—mind, emotions, and will. May this be the mark of your preaching—nothing more, and certainly nothing less. ❖



**Our goal is the  
transformation of lives,  
and this requires that  
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take action.**



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# DELIVERING THE SERMON

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JOHN MACARTHUR

ver the years I have had a lot to say about preaching. Of course, I've always been an advocate of verse-by-verse biblical exposition. It's my delight through our seminary and annual Shepherds' Conferences to train preachers and help equip them with the tools they need to unpack the meaning of the text. My books and other writings are full of instructions and exhortations for preachers, all with one consistent theme: "Preach the word ... in season and out of season" (2 Tim 4:2).

Naturally, my emphasis has been weighted heavily toward the task of careful study and preparation. The *substance* of a sermon interests me far more than the preacher's *style*. That, of course, reflects the Bible's

own priorities. Scripture is emphatic about the need for diligent study and rightly handling the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15), while it says little or nothing about the preacher's posture, gestures, or tone of voice.

Nevertheless, how a preacher delivers the message is by no means a trivial matter. It's possible to preach a perfectly sound sermon in such a tiresome and tedious way that the preacher actually undermines the very truth he is attempting to proclaim. A good sermon poorly preached can turn people away from the truth as quickly as a poor sermon skillfully preached.

There's a famous (possibly apocryphal) story about a time when Alexander MacLaren slipped in unannounced to hear a young preacher. The younger man, unaware of MacLaren's presence, began by saying he

had been too busy to prepare a fresh sermon for the evening so he was going to preach one of Dr. MacLaren's. He read the message in such a droning monotone that afterward MacLaren told him, "I don't mind if you preach my sermons, but if you're going to read them like that, please don't say they're mine."

Elders must be "able to teach" (1 Tim 3:2; 2 Tim 2:24). A lack of skill in public speaking disqualifies a man from pulpit ministry just as surely as theological ineptitude does. Anyone who makes God's Word seem dull and tiresome simply doesn't belong in the pulpit. Indeed, this is one of the major factors to consider when determining a man's call to preach: Can he deliver a sermon in a way that commands and holds the attention of an audience? Does he speak with such clarity, authority, and passion that people are edified by hearing the message? Or does he bore them and lull them to sleep? If it's the latter, the man is most likely not called to preach. He is certainly not *ready* to preach.

Preaching is like playing the piano in that the basic techniques can be learned and improved. But preaching with excellence requires God-given gifts, and such gifts are by no means universal. Not everyone can draw large audiences or preach as well as George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon, or Martyn Lloyd-Jones. (It's worth mentioning also that no preacher should be motivated by a desire for prestige or celebrity. None of the great preachers in church history whose influence has been profound and lasting craved fame or admiration in the first place. What they aspired to was faithfulness.)

However, anyone who is called to preach can learn to deliver the message more effectively by observing a few basic principles. I've already mentioned three of the most important ones: clarity, authority, and passion. Let's consider how those qualities are important in preaching.

## CLARITY

Several factors bring clarity (or a lack thereof) to a sermon. The most obvious is the logical flow of the sermon itself. This starts, of course, in the preparation stage, and it's related to the sermon's content, but the preacher's pace and rhythm can also contribute to (or detract from) the clarity of the message. Speak


too rapidly and your audience will not be able to keep up. Speak too slowly and the listener's own train of thought will take him elsewhere. Punctuate your thoughts with long pauses and his mind will fill those gaps with wandering thoughts. Each of those mistakes will cause your hearers to tune out. Lose them for even a few seconds and you undermine the clarity of your own message.

Another major key to clarity is the ability to make yourself heard with precision. This may seem pretty basic, but it is evidently not an obvious enough point for many. I have heard more good sermons ruined by mumbled sentences, slurred-together syllables, and indistinct consonants than by any other combination of delivery-style faux pas. Every word in your sermon needs to be pronounced clearly, completely, and precisely. Listen closely to any news reader or professional announcer and notice how carefully he or she articulates every syllable. The best preachers do the same thing. Sloppy pronunciation won't motivate your hearers to listen more closely; it will encourage them to tune you out.

Similarly, it might seem obvious that public speakers need to speak up, but it is a common tendency of inexperienced speakers to do the opposite. Timidity causes the preacher to soften his tone, sometimes to the point of making him hard to understand. Ironically, this is a bigger problem today than it was in the years before electronic microphones. In the era of Spurgeon and before, preachers had to shout to be heard by large audiences. Spurgeon once preached to a crowd of twenty thousand in the Crystal Palace (a glass structure with the acoustics of a greenhouse rather than an orchestra hall). But people who stood on the fringe of that crowd testified that they were able to hear every word clearly. People say George Whitefield could be heard and clearly understood up to two miles away when he spoke in the open air. Microphones have eliminated the need for sermons to be delivered at superhuman volumes like that, but many preachers nevertheless need to be encouraged to speak up.

In all the elements of vocal style (volume, rhythm, tone, pitch, inflection, and so on), the key to keeping people's attention is *variety*. Monotony is the enemy of clarity. Other irritating vocal habits can likewise

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# The Word of God is inherently authoritative, so any preacher who proclaims it clearly and accurately is giving an authoritative message.

break your connection with the audience. It's a good idea to listen critically to recordings of your own sermons. We all sound differently from the way we think we sound inside our heads, and it can be a painful experience to hear ourselves the way others hear us. But a critical review of one's own delivery can be a helpful wake-up call, exposing bad mannerisms we didn't even know we had.

## **AUTHORITY**

A second vital characteristic of good preaching is *authority*. Of course, the preacher has no intrinsic authority of his own, but insofar as he proclaims and explains the Word of God accurately, he is delivering a message that comes with God's own authority, and his style needs to reflect that fact.

This was, of course, the singular characteristic of Jesus' preaching that made His message so compelling to people who heard: "He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matt 7:29). Matthew is pointing out that Jesus spoke with

His own authority, whereas the scribes were constantly buttressing their teaching with citations from this or that rabbi or tradition. Jesus, in stark contrast, said things like, "You have heard that it was said ... But I say to you" (Matt 5:21–22; 27–28; 33–34; 38–39; 43–44).

Still, what made Jesus' authority so definitive *as a preacher* was the character of His life. When the chief priests and council were looking for an excuse to put Him to death, they couldn't even find a credible false witness (Matt 26:59–60).

A similar principle applies to every preacher. The Word of God is inherently authoritative, so any preacher who proclaims it clearly and accurately is giving an authoritative message. Indeed, the preacher's authority comes from the biblical mandate to proclaim the Word of God as an envoy—the King's own ambassador, speaking with the King's personal authority. "We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us" (2 Cor 5:20 ESV).

That's true of every preacher, young or old.

Consider Paul's charge to Timothy:

Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. (1 Tim 4:12–16 ESV)

The clear implication is that no preacher can have true authority in his delivery unless his own character is consistent with his message. Indeed, until a man is tested and proven above reproach, he is not ready to serve in any official capacity, much less stand in the pulpit and preach (1 Tim 3:1, 10). If the life of a preacher does not harmonize with his words, the resultant discord will drown out the inherent authority

in the message, regardless of how well prepared and well delivered the sermon may be.

It is also possible to undermine the authority of the message with a weak style of delivery. Those scribes of Jesus' time, for example, were part of a movement that began centuries before, in Nehemiah's time. Their original goals were to preserve the record of Scripture meticulously; to teach its truths to the people of Judah; and thereby to halt that nation's frequent apostasies. But gradually, over several generations, the scribes themselves eroded the people's confidence in the authority of Scripture. They did this by incessantly citing human traditions and human authors as proofs of their doctrines rather than explaining Scripture with Scripture. Don't make that error.

Some preachers are so fearful of sounding dogmatic that they never state anything definitively. Rather than stressing the fact that the Bible has one true meaning and seeking to teach their people what that is, they will review all the alternative interpretations before timidly introducing the view they believe is right, with a weak version of "It seems to me ... ." I've also heard preachers give five or more alternative



interpretations of a passage without ever expressing an opinion on which view is right. That style of teaching is actually gaining popularity in these postmodern times, but it utterly lacks authority.

### **PASSION**

Closely related to the idea of preaching with authority is the need to preach with genuine passion. Martyn Lloyd-Jones famously referred to preaching as “logic on fire.” He meant that good preaching must bring together *both* well-reasoned biblical content and intense passion. He wasn’t advocating passion *per se* (i.e., the crass brand of raw agitation whose sole purpose is to stir a crowd into a mindless emotional high), but a real passion for the truth being proclaimed.


Genuine, heartfelt passion from the preacher will do far more than any visual aid to capture the attention of the congregation and help them remember the lesson. I often advise preachers: turn off PowerPoint, stop with the fill-in-the-blank handouts, and proclaim the truth of God’s Word with sincerity and fervor, energized by the Holy Spirit.

Baptists used to refer to this as *unction*: a manner

of speaking that manifests earnest emotion about the truth being proclaimed. Unfortunately, the word *unction* took on a derogatory connotation in the wake of the charismatic movement, because so many blatant charlatans employed artificial enthusiasm as a substitute for meaningful content in their messages. But genuine passion has nothing to do with showmanship and everything to do with transparency, integrity, and a genuine love for the truth.

The influence of the charismatic movement has also conditioned many Christians in our generation to assume that the only legitimate passions are giddy, whimsical, or even utterly irrational. That’s sheer folly. What may be most lacking in the church today is the polar opposite: a deep and thoughtful sobriety in the presence of God’s Word. God Himself commends such passion: “This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” (Isa 66:2). That is an especially vital passion for preachers to cultivate.

Let the truth set your heart ablaze, and the fire will be evident in your preaching. ♦



**Turn off PowerPoint, stop with the fill-in-the-blank handouts, and proclaim the truth of God’s Word with sincerity and fervor, energized by the Holy Spirit.**







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# CRAFTING THE SERMON

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H. B. CHARLES JR.

**T**here are two extremes preachers fall into when it comes to introductions, illustrations, and conclusions.

Some preachers build the sermon around the homiletical elements, neglecting the priority of the text. They take off strong. They get to a cruising altitude and pilot the sermon without running into turbulence. Then they land smoothly at the same airport from which they took off. It was good flight. The important homiletical policies and procedure were followed. And the congregation enjoyed the ride so much that they never even noticed they did not actually go anywhere. These craft-first preachers are lauded as great communicators. But they fail to preach the Word, to the

spiritual detriment of the large crowds that sit under their preaching.

Other preachers rightly focus on the God-intended meaning of the text. Their preparation process is saturated in prayer for illumination (Ps 119:18, 34). The meaning and grammar of Scripture's words are carefully studied. The literary and historical context is considered. Cross-references are looked up. The best commentaries on the text are reviewed. The doctrinal themes and theological significance of the passage are unearthed. The preacher does his best to rightly divide the word of truth. But there is a heavy fog in the pulpit, because diligent research was not fleshed out in sermon preparation. Careful study has become sloppy preaching because the preacher did not craft



# When the crafting of the sermon overrides the message of the text, it is performance, not preaching. But the burden for truth that drives the expositor to study hard should also drive him to prepare well.

his introduction, choose his illustrations, or plan his conclusion.

Expositional preaching often gets a bad rap for being dry, boring, and lifeless. But zombie preachers should be indicted, not expository preaching. The problem with some expository preaching is that it is exposition, but it is not preaching. There is no question that the preacher knows a lot about the text. But the divine message of the text is not preached. Or, if it is, the various elements of the sermon fail to make the biblical message clear.

When the crafting of the sermon overrides the message of the text, it is performance, not preaching. But the burden for truth that drives the expositor to study hard should also drive him to prepare well. The ancient herald was under orders to proclaim the message of the king to the people. This all-consuming duty shaped the herald's message *and* the presentation of that message.

This is the expositor's charge. True expository

preaching strives to be both faithful to the text and clear in the presentation. It is for this reason that introductions, illustrations, and conclusions should matter to the expositor. This work is not about being creative, eloquent, or impressive in the pulpit. It is about preaching the Word faithfully and clearly to the glory of God and for the salvation and sanctification of those who hear.

Christ-exalting preaching is text-driven. It is also clearly communicated. Faithful preachers do not impose their own ideas on the text. They also do not ramble through their introductions, manipulate in their illustrations, or crash-land during their conclusions.

Let's consider how and why our presentation matters at each phase of the sermon.

## **CRAFT THE INTRODUCTION**

I typically begin my sermons with a word of prayer. I pray publicly to express dependence on God to help

us speak faithfully and hear clearly. Then I read the sermon text without comment. I will have the rest of the sermon to explain and exhort. I believe it affirms the authority of Scripture to begin the sermon by simply reading the text. After praying and reading the text, I state the title of the sermon. The goal is that the title will be an encapsulated preview of the message. Then I proceed to the formal introduction of the sermon.

The introduction is the front porch of the sermon. The front porch welcomes guests to your home. But you do not arrange the living room furniture on the porch. You do not hang a big-screen TV on the porch. You do not serve dinner on the porch. The front porch is only transitional. It welcomes guests to your home and leads them to the front door to enter the house. Sermon introductions work the same way.

Sermon introductions should be brief. Too often preachers spend a major chunk of their allotted time in the introduction. It seems they are sticking all the material they could not find another place for into the introduction. Then, near the end of the sermon, they get to a point where they say, “I wish I had more time to deal with this.” You did. But you spent it in the introduction.

Don’t spend too much time setting up the message of the text. Get to the text and trust it to do the work in the minds and hearts of the congregation. The introduction should point toward where the sermon is


headed. But the goal of the travel agent is not merely to captivate with descriptions of exotic locations. It is to get the traveler on a plane to that destination.

Though the introduction may be short, it must do its job well. The introduction should set the text in its proper context. A text without a context is a pretext. Expository preaching seeks to explain what the text means by what it says. Context is essential to understanding what the text says and means. Just as the three rules of real estate are location, location, location, the three rules of Bible exposition are context, context, context. Thus, the introduction should sketch the big picture of the text: how it fits into its wider context.

Likewise, the introduction should state the main point of the sermon. You don’t have to prove, defend, or apply that point yet. In the introduction, tell the congregation where you are going; in the body of the exposition, take them there. Presenting the literary and historical context roots the text in the world of the text. Stating the point of the sermon in a clear, present-tense, active sentence roots the text in the world of the congregation. The expository sermon then becomes a bridge between the text and the congregation that connects them to the truth of God’s Word.

### **CHOOSE THE ILLUSTRATIONS**

Sermon illustrations are like windows on a house.



**Don’t spend too much time setting up the message of the text. Get to the text and trust it to do the work in the minds and hearts of the congregation.**

They help the listeners see the point and discern how the point lives in the world beyond the sermon. This is one of the key lessons we can learn from the preaching of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Gospels. The preaching of Jesus was sound, faithful, and profound. It was also filled with illustrations, word pictures, and parables. Many times, Jesus preached remarkable sermons by telling simple stories. Jesus exemplified the power of illustration in preaching.

Normal people do not build houses with no windows. They also do not build houses that consist of only windows. Similarly, you must not allow illustrations to dominate the text of the sermon. So, your aim should be to keep them short. Don't use too many of them. Select them carefully.

Practice integrity with the facts. Avoid manipulating emotions. Be careful of "indecent exposure" in the pulpit. Guard family and counseling confidantialities.

Don't be the star of your own stories.


In addition, make sure the illustration speaks for itself. Comedians say if you have to explain the joke, it bombed. So it is with illustrations. Sermon illustrations are there to make the exposition clear. You should not have to also do an exposition of the illustration.

In sum, sermon illustrations are servants of the text in expository preaching. If you have to choose between the text and the illustration, always side with the text!

One way to keep illustrations in their proper place is to make sure the illustrations actually illustrate. That is, do not tell a story just to tell it. It may be humorous, memorable, or compelling. But you are not to be a pulpit storyteller. You are to be a faithful expositor of the Word of God. Any illustration you use should be to shed light on the text. It should illustrate



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**The sermon conclusion should be an actual conclusion. Do not start with a bang and end with a fizzle. Do not preach until you run out of time or material. Do not plan the sermon and just “let the Spirit lead you” at the end.**

the exposition of the text and exhort the hearers to be doers of the Word.

It is important to practice scrutiny in choosing illustrations. Ask hard questions before you insert the illustration into the sermon: What is the point of this illustration? Is this illustration about what the text is about? Does it make the text clearer? Does it get in the way of the text? Will this illustration connect to the listening congregation? Can this illustration shade the mood of the congregation in a way that hinders them from continuing to think through the text? Am I using an illustration to clarify or to cover for a weak argument?

Consider the principle of illustrative mention. Every major truth of Scripture has a corresponding

biblical illustration. Joseph illustrates fleeing temptation. David illustrates the danger of sexual immorality. Ananias and Sapphira illustrate the consequences of lying. And many other persons or events illustrate biblical truth. When appropriate, use Scripture to illustrate. All of the sermon illustrations in the world are not as rich with meaning as the Bible itself. As you use Scripture to illustrate, you continue to teach Scripture while you illustrate. And your illustrations carry divine authority.

#### **PLAN THE CONCLUSION**

A sermon should be a self-contained unit, consisting of an introduction, main body, and conclusion. There are exceptions. But exceptions are not the norm. Very

few preachers are skilled to preach one sermon over three or four weeks. From week to week, the sermon should formally begin and decisively conclude. My advice to pastors is to preach series through books of the Bible. I reject the notion that pastors must keep the series under six weeks to keep the congregation's attention. I acknowledge that we live in a mobile generation with a short attention span. Yet this is no reason to abandon consecutive exposition. But as we preach extended series, each sermon in the series should stand on its own. For this reason, the sermon conclusion is just as important as the sermon introduction.

The sermon conclusion should be an actual conclusion. Do not start with a bang and end with a fizzle. Do not preach until you run out of time or material. Do not plan the sermon and just “let the Spirit lead you” at the end. The conclusion of the sermon should be strategically planned and skillfully executed. The pilot's ability to take off and climb to a cruising altitude is all for nothing if he cannot land the plane. The conclusion of the sermon safely lands the plane. The purpose of the sermon should be clear in the preacher's mind. The elements of the sermon should be united around the main idea of the text. And there should be a sense of movement forward toward a logical conclusion.

The conclusion of the sermon is not a second introduction. This is not a time to bring in new material. The exposition of the text should be completed in the body of the sermon. Do not use the end of the sermon to stick in everything you did not get to say yet. The

conclusion is the time to review where you have been, not a last chance to get in a few more sermon nuggets.

In the conclusion, all that has been preached so far should be brought to bear on the hearer as a call to action. To hear the Word without doing what it says is self-deception (James 1:22). The wise man builds his house on the rock by doing what the Lord commands (Matt 7:24–27). The conclusion should issue the sermon's final challenge to observe all that Christ commands (Matt 28:20).

There are two groups in the audience who need this final challenge.

As pastors-teachers, we regularly preach to professing believers. The pastor who is committed to expository preaching must think about the sermon in practical terms, not just exegetically, theologically, or homiletically. What we preach on Sunday should equip our people to follow Jesus where they live on Monday.

Yet we must not assume that all professing believers are true Christians (Matt 7:21–23). There will be many in our pews who walk in a false presumption of salvation. This Sunday-morning mission field should burden us to conclude by calling unbelievers—be they professing Christians or conscious unbelievers—to repent of their sins and call on the Lord for salvation.

Point the congregation to the Lord Jesus Christ in the conclusion. Finish strong by calling your hearers to trust and obey Christ. “Him we preach,” declares the Apostle Paul, “warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col 1:28 ESV). ♦



**What we preach on Sunday  
should equip our people to follow  
Jesus where they live on Monday.**





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# SO WHAT?: SERMON APPLICATION

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DAVID P. MURRAY

**W**e've all heard them. Sadly, many of us have preached them. Sermons which leave our hearers asking the title of this article: "So what?"

Engaging introduction, sensitive contextualization, beautiful structure, outstanding exegesis, impressive oratory—but "So what?" A sermon is not a sermon if that's the takeaway. A sermon is only a sermon if its outcome is "I have something to do." Truth must result in action, principles must produce practice, and exposition must end in application. As Jay Adams wrote in *Truth Applied*:

Application is the ... process by which preachers make scriptural truths so pertinent to members of their congregations that they not only understand how these truths should effect changes in their lives but also feel obligated and perhaps even eager to implement those changes.

Although the need for such application may seem obvious and instinctive to most preachers—indeed, Spurgeon went so far as to say, "Where the application begins, there the sermon begins"—some refuse to do it and even argue against it, believing that once they've explained the meaning of the text, we can



**Application is not only warranted by Scripture; it is defined by it. ... Application is the painful process of bringing the primary unchanging principles of the preaching passage into life-changing contact with people who live in an ever-changing world.**

all go home. They do not even attempt to bring the meaning and direction of the text into the here and now. The unfairness of this approach is highlighted by Douglas Stuart in his book *Old Testament Exegesis*:

The exegete, who has come to know the passage best, refuses to help the reader or hearer of the passage at the very point where the reader's or hearer's interest is keenest. The exegete leaves the key function—response—completely to the subjective sensibilities of the reader or hearer, who knows the passage least.

What can we expect from such sermons? John Calvin answered, “If we leave it to men's choice to follow

what is taught them, they will never move one foot. Therefore, the doctrine of itself can profit nothing at all.”

Scripture itself is replete with examples of scriptural application. Christ applied the law to the rich young ruler (Matt 19:16–22), the Apostle Peter applied the prophetic Scriptures of the Old Testament to his generation (Acts 2:14–36) with the intention of moving them to action (vv.37–38), and the Apostle Paul says that the history of Israel was written as an example, an admonition, and a comfort to all later generations (1 Cor 10:11; Rom 15:4).

Application is not only warranted by Scripture; it is defined by it. As I have surveyed the Bible's own application of itself, I've developed the following

definition: *Application is the painful process of bringing the primary unchanging principles of the preaching passage into life-changing contact with people who live in an ever-changing world.* Now, let me exposit that for you.

## **PAINFUL PROCESS**

If you ask many preachers how long they spend in preparing the expository part of the sermon compared to the application part, I'm guessing the ratio would be something like 99:1! This probably explains why many of us don't do application, or don't do it well. However, as Douglas Stuart writes, "An application should be just as rigorous, just as thorough, and just as analytically sound as any other step in the exegesis process. It cannot be merely tacked on to the rest of the exegesis as a sort of spiritual afterthought."

This requires time, work, concentration, and, above all, prayer. It's particularly painful because it's usually the last step in sermon preparation—when we've done the exegetical work, our brains are fried, and we're longing to be done and relax. So, if we needed prayer for exposition of the Word, we need it even more for the application of it. We pray that the Holy Spirit would not only help us know our text but also help us to know our hearers and guide us to the exact applications people need to hear (1 Cor 2:11).

## **PAST PURPOSE**

Although the first question in application is often "What does that mean for *me*?" the first question should be "What *did* this mean for *them*?"

Every book in the Bible had an original purpose. The original writer wrote the words to the original audience with an original purpose in mind. In some cases, especially in the New Testament, that purpose is clearly identified. For example, the Apostle John told us that he wrote his Gospel to prove that Jesus is the Son of God and to persuade his readers to find eternal life in him (John 20:31; cf. 1 John 5:13). Luke clearly told us why he wrote his Gospel (Luke 1:1–4). A number of Paul's epistles also have an explicitly stated purpose (e.g., 1 Cor 1:10ff.; Gal 1:6ff.).

Although the purpose may not be explicitly stated in every New Testament book, we can usually work out the purpose from the contents. New Testament Introduction studies and study Bible introductions

are especially helpful here. It's more difficult in the Old Testament, especially with the historical books, but again, modern study Bibles and Old Testament Introduction books can help us work out why the writer wrote, what problems or opportunities he was addressing, and how the material in the book serves that purpose. (See also Richard Pratt's *He Gave Us Stories* for further guidance).

The point is that whether the details are explicit or implicit, each biblical author was inspired by God to write to a specific audience with a specific purpose to meet specific needs. Each book had an original meaning with an original application. It's our task to discover that and use it as a guide in teaching the meaning of a passage and its application. The original meaning and application are like two train tracks that ensure we stay within the original intention of both God and the human writer.

Our interpretation and our application may go further along the tracks than the original writer's knowledge (because we have further revelation and more of the Holy Spirit), but the meaning and application may never leave these tracks. As Jay Adams put it, "The truth God revealed in Scripture came in an applied form and should be reapplied to the same sort of people for the same purposes for which it was originally given. That is to say, truth should be applied today just as God originally applied it." Once we know the original purpose of the original book, we can then turn to the particular passage we are exegeting and ask how it specifically contributes to that overall original purpose.

## **PRIMARY PRINCIPLES**

Apart from failing to apply the text at all, or applying it to a modern audience without asking about the original application, the most common mistakes I've come across in application are basing it on anecdotes or on another passage than the one preached. In the former, the preacher may tell an inspiring story that he saw in the news or read in a book and then call the congregation to similar action. In the latter, the preacher may exposit one biblical passage but then turn to another for application. The former has no attachment to God's Word, while the latter is attached to a different portion of God's Word than that exegeted.

However, for the application to be convincing and

effective, the hearer, Adams writes, “needs to see how you derived the application as the natural and final stage of the entire process of careful, analytical study of your passage.” If we have done our exegetical work well and explored the original purpose, the primary application of the passage to ourselves should be easier to discover. Some of the questions I ask as I explore this question are:

- What is this text asking me to believe about God and myself, sin and salvation, the world and the world to come?
- What sin is this verse forbidding? What duty is this verse commanding?
- What grace, fruit, or gift of the Spirit is this passage calling for?
- How should this verse impact my relationships with God, my family, my friends, my neighbors, my enemies?
- Is this passage addressed to believers, unbelievers, hypocrites, doubters, etc.?
- What does this teach me about my responsibilities as a church member, a citizen, an employee?
- Is there an example here I’m being urged to avoid or follow?
- What is there in this verse to draw me to worship?
- Does this text admonish, rebuke, convict, or warn me? How and why?
- Does it encourage, comfort, console, or promise me? How and why?
- What is this verse asking me to question and examine?
- Does this verse ask me to look to the past, the present, or the future?

- Is this verse addressing my mind, my emotions, my will, my desires, or my conscience?
- Is this verse focused on me as an individual or upon the body of Christ, his church?
- What is this verse intended to change in me, my family, my church, my workplace, my world?

Remember, we are looking for the *primary* application of the preaching passage. There may be accidental, incidental, or coincidental applications that arise from these questions, but we must keep asking ourselves, “What was the primary purpose of the writer?” That will help us major on the majors and leave out the minors.

### PRECISE PARTICULARS

So far, we have been discussing passages in which the application is not immediately obvious (e.g., Old Testament narratives, the doctrinal chapters in the Epistles). There are other passages which are already practical and therefore we do not need to work out the primary principle of application (e.g., Romans 12, Ephesians 5). But whether the principal application is explicitly stated or whether we have had to work it out, we must not stop with mere generalizations (e.g., “you should be holy,” “you should be a good husband,” etc.). We must show how that applicatory principle is worked out in specific, concrete, everyday situations by asking “How? Where? When?”

For example, John the Baptist preached the necessity of fruit-bearing repentance, but then specified the exact fruit each specific group was to bring forth (Luke 3:10–14). Hearers must not be left to make the point to themselves, because they won’t do it. As Bridges noted: “We must not expect our hearers to apply to themselves such unpalatable truths. So unnatural is this habit of personal application that most will fit the doctrine to anyone but themselves.” When we think we’ve arrived at the right general application, we must push ourselves to make it as concrete, as detailed, and as helpful as possible so that it is impossible for people to misunderstand what is required and how to go about it.



Some of our sermons will have “hands and feet” application; others will have more spiritual application. The former is concerned with outward and visible actions; the latter is more concerned with the soul, the invisible. If anything is missing in application in our own day, it is the latter—application to the soul. Even where there is application to the soul in modern sermons, it is usually in accusing and convicting Christians of sin—which is necessary. However, God’s people also need spiritual comfort and encouragement, especially when living in such an uncomfortable and discouraging world.

### **PRESENT POWER**


The preacher stands, as John Stott put it, between two worlds. On the one hand, there is the unchanging world of God’s Word; on the other, there is the ever-changing world that we live in. Though understanding God’s Word is often difficult and challenging, at least it stays the same. When we turn towards the world, we see constant flux, transition, revolution, and fluctuation. The preacher’s challenge is to take the unchanging Word and pin it on an ever-changing,

ever-moving world. It often feels like trying to hammer a nail into jelly.

The task, however, is made considerably easier if we keep up to date with the world we live in. Without becoming “worldly,” we must know and understand our world and the powerful influences of our own day. We need to keep up to date with trends, movements, ideas, philosophies, morals, and influences of our times in order to apply the unchanging principles of God’s Word to our ever-changing world in life-changing ways.

### **PERSONAL POINT**

Daniel Webster exclaimed, “When a man preaches to me, I want him to make it a personal matter, a personal matter, a personal matter!” That means most application must not only be in the present tense but in the “second person.” As Jay Adams explains in *Truth Applied*, there are times when we will identify personally with the application, speaking in first-person terms (e.g., Heb 4:1, 11, 14, 16); at other times we may apply the truth in the third person (e.g., Titus 1:10–16; John 3:5); but the majority of applications will be in the



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second person (e.g., John 3:7; Rom 12:1, 2 Cor 5:20).

Such practice will avoid the common scenario highlighted by pastor Al Martin: “Many sermons are like unaddressed, unsigned letters which if a hundred people read it they would not think the contents concerned them.” The preacher’s hearers must know that they are being addressed personally and even individually. One way to improve application in this area is to go through the congregation and try to describe each person with one or two words that characterize his or her spiritual condition or status. That should produce a ready-made checklist of the various kinds of hearers in the congregation to focus application on.

To get started, here are some *broad categories* of listeners to aim application at: Christian/non-Christian,

Old/Young, Rich/Poor, Parents/Children/Singles, Employer/Employee, Government/Citizen, Male/Female, Atheist/Agnostic/Persecutor.

And here are some *narrower categories* of people that may be found in some, many, or even all of each of the broader categories: the sick, dying, afflicted, tempted, backslidden, hypocrite, anxious, immoral, lonely, discouraged, worried, tired, seeker, doubter, proud, bereaved, broken-hearted, convicted, and more.

### **PASSIONATE PREACHING**

Hopefully, as the sermon nears its close, the exposition of Scripture has already begun to warn our hearts and those of our hearers. However, the temperature

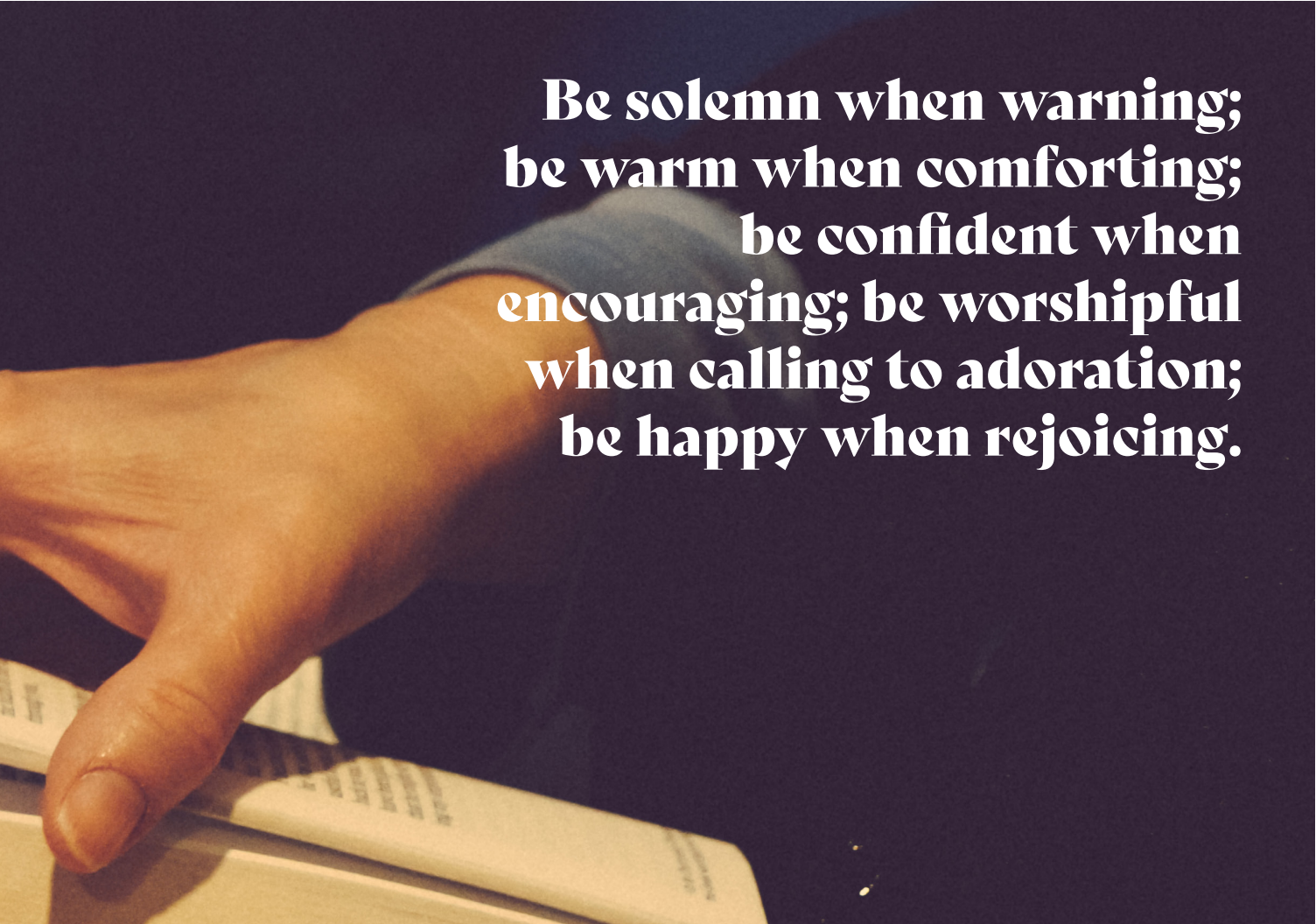


should increase further when moving to application. There is no part of the sermon that requires more of the preacher's emotional involvement than the application. In his book *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric*, R. L. Dabney wrote: "To produce volition, it is not enough that the understanding be convinced; affection must also be aroused."

To do this, our own feelings must reflect the nature of the application. Be solemn when warning; be warm when comforting; be confident when encouraging; be worshipful when calling to adoration; be happy when rejoicing. Here's Dabney again:

The preacher's soul should here show itself fired with the force of the truth which has been

developed, and glowing both with light and heat. The quality of unction should suffuse the end of your discourse and bathe the truth in evangelical emotion. But this emotion must be genuine and not assumed; it must be spiritual, the zeal of heavenly love, and not the carnal heat of the mental gymnastic ... It must disclose itself spontaneously and unannounced, as the gushing of a fountain which will not be suppressed. What can give this glow except the indwelling of the Holy Ghost? You are thus led again to that great, ever-recurring deduction, the first qualification of the sacred orator, the grace of Christ. ♦



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be warm when comforting;  
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C. H. Spurgeon

Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) was the undisputed Prince of Preachers who has left a goldmine of insights into the nature of a sermon. We would benefit greatly from internalizing some of his thoughts on this important subject.

#### **SCRIPTURE**

“The discourse should spring out of the text...and the more evidently it does so, the better.”

“Not a lecture about the Scripture, but the Scripture itself.”

#### **STRUCTURE**

“The passage should be divided out into parts and well-arranged. You should have headings which are like legs to a chair, holding up the whole truth.”

“The thought must climb and ascend; one stair of teaching leading to another...In preaching, have a place for everything, and everything in its place.”

#### **SIMPLICITY**

“Do not overload a sermon with too much matter. All truth is not to be comprised in one discourse. Sermons are not to be bodies of divinity. There is such a thing as having too much to say...One thought fixed on the mind will be better than fifty thoughts made to flit across the ear. One tenpenny nail driven home and clenched will be more useful than a score of tin-tacks fixed to be pulled out.”

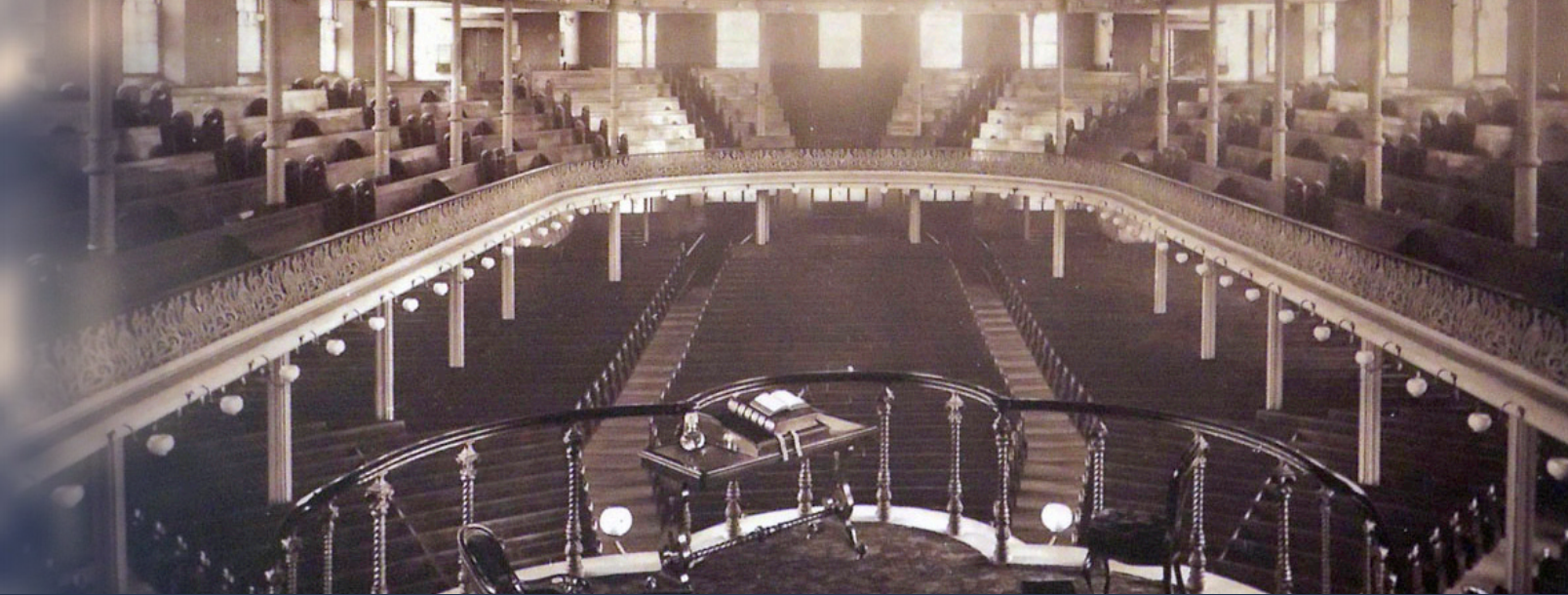
“If men are to be saved, we must, in plainest terms, preach.”

#### **SALVATION**

“The entire gospel must be presented from the pulpit; the whole faith once delivered to the saints must be proclaimed by us.”

“I would sooner pluck one brand from the burning than explain all the mysteries. To win a soul from going down into the pit is a more glorious achievement than to be crowned in the arena of theological controversy as Doctor Supreme.”

“To have faithfully unveiled the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ will be in the final judgment accounted worthier service than to have solved the problems of the religious Sphinx, or to have cut the Gordian Knot of apocalyptic difficulty.”



### **STEPS**

“There must be action steps of application issued, offered by the sermon. The sermon must include the so what? Indicatives must lead to imperatives. The what must lead to the so what. Doctrine must lead to duty. Precepts must lead to practice.”

### **SAVIOR**

“This is the sum; my brethren, preach Christ, always and evermore. He is the whole gospel. His person, offices, and work must be our one great all-comprehending theme. The world needs to be taught of its Savior...Blessed is that ministry of which Christ is all.”

### **SUBSTANCE**

“Sermons should have real teaching in them, and their doctrine should be solid, substantial, and abundant.”

“The true value of a sermon must lie, not in its fashion and manner, but in the truth which it contains. Nothing can compensate for the absence of teaching. It is foolish to be lavish in words and [short] in truth... Rousing appeals to the affects are excellent, but if they are not back up by instruction they are a mere flash in the pan.”

### **SUPREMACY**

“The grand object of the Christian ministry is the glory of God. Whether souls are converted or not, if Jesus Christ is faithfully preached, the minister has not labored in vain.”

### **SUMMONS**

“In our Master’s name we must give the invitation, crying, ‘Whoever will, let him take the water of life freely.’”

“Brethren, we must plead. Entreaties and beseechings must blend without instructions. Any and every appeal which will reach the conscience and move men to fly to Jesus we must perpetually employ.”

### **SEVERITY**

“We must come to the threatening, and declare the wrath of God upon impenitent souls. We must lift the curtain, and let them see the future. Show them their danger, and warn them to escape from the wrath to come.”



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OnePassion Ministries hosts events to equip and encourage anyone who teaches and preaches the Word of God. Our goal is to encourage pastors, church leaders, Bible teachers, and those interested in the ministry of biblical preaching to stand strong and to equip them to correctly exposit the Word of God. Dr. Steven Lawson will gather with pastors, church leaders, Bible teachers, and anyone interested in the ministry of biblical preaching and teach multiple sessions on expository preaching.

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