

# **The Spoken Word - Wes Baker**

(Helps in Sermon Preparation and Preaching)

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"What you preach is what you get."

## **The Spoken Word of Man**

The New Testament Gospel or Good News about the Word is itself likewise tied to the spoken word of man. For it is the business of those who know this Truth to make it known to all other men by use of the word in preaching, where the human word exists in a mysterious connection with the divine. The Christian Church is thus inevitably a missionary church, committed to sharing its good news with all men, driven by the Word to maximum communication, and in all this, through the personal contacts effected most, basically by the spoken word. *Fides ex auditu*, "faith comes through hearing," we read in the Epistle to the Romans (10:17).

Walter J. Ong

The Presence of The Word

## **Excerpts From First Century Letters**

To Timothy: (A. D. 64)

Make use of the time until I arrive by reading to the people, preaching and teaching. You have in you a spiritual gift which was given to you when the prophets spoke and the body of elders laid their hands on you; do not let it lie unused. Think hard about all this, and put it into practice, and everyone will be able to see how you are advancing. Take great care about what you do and what you teach; always do this and in this way you will save both yourself and those who listen to you.

From Paul - I Timothy 4:13-16

To Timothy: (A. D. 67)

Before God and before Christ Jesus who is to be judge of the living and the dead, I put this duty to you, In the name of His appearing and of His kingdom: proclaim the message and, welcome or unwelcome, insist on it. Refute falsehood, correct error, call to obedience - but do all with patience and with the intention of teaching. The time will come when, far from being content with sound teaching, people will be avid for the latest novelty and collect themselves a whole series of teachers according to their own tastes; and then instead of listening to the truth, they will turn to myths. Be careful to choose the right course; be brave under trials; make the preaching of the Good News your life's work, in thoroughgoing service.

From Paul. - II Timothy 4:1-5

## **INTRODUCTION**

Jesus Christ was a preacher. In the Gospel of Matthew, chapter four and verse twenty-three, we read that Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching, preaching and healing the sick.

A light had pierced the unholy shroud of darkness that covered the earth. The ancient Hebrew Prophet Isaiah peered through the dark ages of time to see and prophesy of that Holy Light sent from Heaven:

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

Jesus was the Anointed One Who came to preach the Gospel to the poor and proclaim deliverance to the captives. He was the Light sent to redeem those who dwell in the land of shadows and death. He was both the Message and the Messenger.

Having defeated the evil one on the cross and death in the tomb, He arose from the grave in triumph, commissioned His people to preach the Gospel to the Global community of man, ascended into Heaven to assume His Priestly Ministry at the right hand of the Father. His promise: He will return. Our commission: Preach.

Two millenniums have passed since that commission was first conferred upon a small group of fishermen, tax collectors and just ordinary people. What did they do? They believed Him and obeyed Him, preaching the Gospel

everywhere.

The beginnings were small.

The people were ordinary.

The Message was ... extraordinary!

Preaching is speaking that extraordinary Message. Through the centuries preaching has shaped the destiny of the church and affected the lives of millions of people. It is God's chosen method of saving the lost and bringing light to a darkened world.

Great revivals and spiritual awakenings have come through the simplicity of preaching the Gospel.

For example, The Great Awakening in the thirteen colonies beginning in 1734 had its inception in Northampton, Massachusetts, through the preaching of Jonathan Edwards. His powerful messages shook the staid, spiritually complacent religious climate of the New England states.

Edwards' famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," preached in Enfield on July eighth, Seventeen Forty-one, is still in print.

History is replete with the names of preachers who impacted their world and their generation. Names such as Wesley, Whitfield, Finney, Moody and Spurgeon, to name just a few who dared to challenge their times with "The Spoken Word."

Only eternity will reveal the impact made by a multitude of unheralded and mostly unknown but faithful messengers of God.

As we are about to witness the birth of a new century and a new millennium, we see God stirring the hearts of man to become messengers of hope.

There is a new wave of inspiration and anointing for a new generation of preachers and teachers who will take the Gospel of Christ to the Nations.

The Third Millennium is about to dawn.

Jesus Christ is coming soon.

Preach we must.

Preach we will.

The Spoken Word.

The sermon normally begins when the minister devotionally reads his Bible. In the feeding of his own soul he finds material with which to feed others.

William Ward Ayer - We Prepare And Preach

Never as you read, night or morning, be without paper and pen... the clear and quick recording of illustrations; the copying out of quotations; the jotting down of some fleeting suggestive line of thought: such material carefully gathered, preserved... is simply invaluable. It took me altogether too long to learn that; I have lost a hundred sermons.

Paul Scherer - For We Have This Treasure "Yale Lectures On Preaching"

# 1

## Sermon Sources

It is late Saturday afternoon and the pastor is in his study desperately searching the pages of his Bible for a sermon idea. He hopes that somehow a sermon text will leap out of the pages as he peruses them.

Not finding a sermon idea he hastily moves on to the files to rummage through old sermon notes seeking to find one he can resurrect, retitle and use again.

If only he could remember where that scripture was located that he was impressed with earlier in the week.

Where did he put those slips of paper he jotted down some thoughts on while waiting in the restaurant for his luncheon companion to arrive?

Sound familiar?

It's called "Saturday panic." Sheep to feed and no food prepared.

Most of us have found ourselves in a comparable situation. Time thieves have stolen precious hours from our week. Heavy demands by the myriad of ministerial obligations have kept us away from the study.

Sunday is breathing down our neck and we are without a sermon to preach.

We do not pretend that there are any easy, simplistic solutions to the problem of the many legitimate demands on a minister's time and attention. There will always be people to counsel, sick calls to make, committee meetings and planning sessions to prepare for and attend; phone calls to be made or returned, letters to be written or answered. It is all part of ministering.

While confirming the validity of such activities we still must not allow them to crowd out the high priority task of sermon preparation.

There are steps to take in setting up a plan and procedure for finding, developing and preserving sermon ideas.

With that objective in mind, the suggestions that follow will help you to establish a workable system to locate a text and then develop an effective sermon.

As we embark on this journey of sermon development it is important to remember that even though there are a variety of possible sources for sermon ideas, there is only one valid source and stream that our message should flow from: the Bible.

The Bible is our sermon sourcebook, the matrix of all God inspired preaching.

It is Biblical preaching that will change lives and bring spiritual direction to people living in the arena of pressure-packed contemporary life.

Sermons born out of social issues, current events, secular literature or peculiar personal revelations may interest a few and entertain others but they will fall hopelessly short of helping people in the spiritual dimensions of their lives.

Working from the fact and premise that the Bible is God's Word and our sermon sourcebook, it is imperative that we schedule ample time each day to read and study the Scripture.

Book a daily appointment with your Bible. If you work from a written daily schedule divided into hourly increments, write in your Bible appointment. If you prioritize your schedule make it a 1A.

Good work habits and disciplines or the lack of them-n will vitally affect your sermon preparation and the quality of messages you preach. That is why it is so important and crucial that you establish good study habits and disciplines early on.

If you have lacked such discipline and failed to establish good study and work habits it is not too late to change. Exchanging good habits for poor habits is seldom easy but always possible. It is never too late to adopt new practices that will work for you, not against you.

Begin now. Today.

The first step is to wipe the dust off your Bible, open it up and begin systematic reading. Does this sound like trite and unnecessary advice to students and ministers? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

As you spend time reading the Word of God, the Holy Spirit will open up fresh and inspiring thoughts and truths that will furnish good sermon material.

Alan Redpath, successful and internationally known pastor, evangelist and author, was well aware of the importance of looking to the Bible as his sermon sourcebook and to the Holy Spirit for inspiration in sermon preparation. In the book, **We Prepare And Preach** he says:

"We must get the theme and essential content Of the message from the Word of God and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit."

God will speak to us as we study His Word.

During your Bible reading time it will be important to have a pen and writing pad so you can 'jot down those thoughts and verses that seem to have sermon possibilities.

To conserve those seed thoughts you have written down it is suggested that you record the material on index cards. Write the topic and text across the top of the card and other thoughts that may come to you under that heading. Often a simple outline will be discovered in the text. Write it down. Later, you can use those note cards to develop a sermon.

If you follow that practice regularly and keep the cards filed so you can easily find them, you will not soon run out of sermon ideas.

Another idea for developing sermon texts is to compile a list of important Bible doctrines. From that list you can prepare one or more sermons on a particular doctrinal subject.

As you prepare that list it is important to stay in the mainstream of sound, Biblical theology. Some spend a great deal of time on peripheral issues of Biblical teaching while their people do not even understand the foundational truths of salvation.

Develop a tracking system on your sermons and see what Biblical teachings you have covered in a six-month period of time. You may be surprised.

Avoid using obscure and misleading texts. Integrity in selecting and using a text correctly is imperative. To make an honest mistake in misapplying a Bible text is understandable; to misapply a text intentionally is inexcusable.

It is not advisable or prudent to build a doctrine or base a teaching on a single verse of scripture. The tragic false teachings of the cults stand as solemn testimony and warning against such practice.

Some sincere but mistaken ministers have created problems in sermon preparation by attempting to find a scripture to fit the idea or topic they have dreamed up. In reality, what they are often doing is attempting to make the Bible support what they have already concluded. To engage in such a questionable practice usually produces "thus saith you" rather than "thus saith the Lord."

Paul's advice to Titus is germane to the subject of sermon preparation:

In all your teaching show the strictest regard for the truth.

It is discreet and wise to let the Bible speak to you rather than you forcing your ideas into a scriptural setting.

Scriptural statements such as:

For the word of God is living and powerful; The words that I (Jesus) speak to you are spirit, and they are life;

ensure us that the Bible is a timeless, living message that will speak to us if we will but listen. Another occasion when inspiration for a sermon may come to you is when you are praying for your congregation and ministry.

A certain need will come to your attention and it will become evident that covering a particular subject in a message will help meet that need. Sometimes as you pray, the Lord will impress you with a text. Write those thoughts down.

Later, you will be able to follow that stream of inspiration to develop a message that will minister to the needs of the people. Caution: do not just preach problems or aim your sermons at a few problem people. You have a congregation to feed.

Ideas, topics for sermons and illustration material are often found in Christian periodicals and journals. Good Christian books can often trigger our thinking into a vein of truth that will give birth to an effective sermon.

It would be difficult to overstate the value and importance of reading. This is especially true for ministers, teachers and speakers.

Keeping informed of current social trends and problems, along with global events, through reading, will assist you in understanding the world and the conditions in which people live. The problems they must cope with today are complex and mind-boggling.

Such information will help you relate and apply your sermons to the daily problems and needs of people in all walks of life.

Always be aware and conscious of the important fact that you are ministering to a broad diversity of human experience and need.

Ministers and mature Christians often develop a kind of religious tunnel vision due to their spiritual, church-centered focus and lifestyle. Of course, that focus and lifestyle is desirable, but if we are not careful we lose our ability to communicate with and influence those whose focus and lifestyle is centered in a non-Christian society.

Our Christian jargon and vernacular communications well within the community of believers but often leaves the

uninitiated in the dark.

We speak "Christian."

They speak "worldly."

We must build the bridge.

Communicating with the uninitiated and common person in contemporary society is essential. It was no accident that the Greek of the New Testament was that of the common man in the marketplace.

Reading, observing and listening to the sounds and expressions of contemporary life will greatly enhance your ability to effectively communicate with people in all walks of life. Reading is a powerful key to understanding.

It has been said: "leaders are readers."

That is especially true of those who would lead the church and feed the flock of God. Extensive reading in a broad variety of sources is important and imperative as you pursue what should be a continuing course of self-education.

Read wisely.

Be selective in your reading. What you feed your mind is as important as what you feed your body. In fact, more important.

Resist buying literary "junk food" and purchase with care good, worthwhile Christian books. It is unwise to spend your book budget on faddish, sensational books written to entertain and market but furnish little of valuable substance and help.

The use of discretion, along with some knowledge of authors and publishers, will help you greatly as you peruse the dusty shelves of your favorite old used bookshop. Some failing to use such care have carried home found treasures that turned out to be volumes published and distributed by cults and suitable only to fuel the fireplace.

Further help in discovering ideas and inspiration for sermons can be found in other ministers' sermons.

We have available many volumes of printed sermons, both classic messages from the past and contemporary sermons from outstanding preachers and teachers. In addition to the printed messages we have numerous sermons recorded on audio and video cassette tapes by some of the finest ministers of our day.

It would be a mistake not to value and draw from such a vast reservoir of preaching and teaching that is readily accessible to most.

Add to that reservoir of preaching and teaching the present opportunity of hearing other speakers in person. Such opportunities will enrich and profit your ministry. You are suffering from an over-inflated ego if you no longer value listening to another minister's sermons. Sometimes the Lord will speak to us from the mouths of those we consider "below our level of preaching skill." Or perhaps He will instruct us through those with whom we do not completely agree.

Sermons that are blessed of God seem to initiate streams of ideas and inspiration in our minds as we listen. Wisdom dictates that we should write those thoughts down so they don't slip through the cracks in our memory and be lost forever.

During the formative years of my own ministry I was inspired and influenced by listening to ministers who were gifted and effective communicators.

One such occasion was while I was attending Bible college. I had the opportunity to hear Dr. Oswald J. Smith who was at that time pastor of the Peoples Church in Toronto, Canada.

Besides being the founder and pastor of the Peoples Church, Dr. Smith was also an internationally known missionary statesman, hymn writer and author. His sermons, hymns and books have touched the hearts of countless thousands of people.

The sermons Dr. Smith preached in that conference impacted my life deeply. Along with his book, **Passion For Souls**, those sermons stirred my heart and confirmed my commitment to evangelism and world missions.

Years after those meetings I enjoyed the pleasure and privilege of entertaining Dr. Smith as a guest speaker in my church. As we shared and fellowshiped in my study before the service began, it became quite evident to me that this man was all that he preached. His ministry flowed from his heart, a heart filled with compassion and concern for the unreached, unconverted masses of the world. The world Jesus loved and died for.

Sermons that move people such as the messages preached by Dr. Smith must come from personal convictions founded on Scriptural truth. It is helpful to take inspiration and ideas from the sermons of others but let the sermon develop into your own message that reflects your study and creative labor.

Effective sermons issue out of the spiritual life and convictions of the preacher. It is difficult to preach other people's convictions with conviction.

For that reason it is not suggested that you get into the habit of using "canned" sermon outlines. Sermon outline books are available in abundance. Such books may be of help in the beginning of your ministry but you need to wean yourself from them early on. That is essential if you are to develop in your sermon building and preaching skills.

The human mind tends to be lazy and like a stream of water will take the easiest course available. You will go to the sermon outline books before you open your Bible or pray. It is necessary, therefore, to discipline your mind, develop your creativity, and hear from God.

The last suggested method of finding sermon ideas is to plan a series of sermons that will take you through a book in the Bible, great chapters of the Bible, or a series on Bible characters.

Preaching a series of sermons will eliminate the search each week for a text. It will not eliminate the need for good research and disciplined study of your text.

Series of sermons will build interest in the congregation and will help them to a better understanding of the continuity of Scripture.

As a reference and example of this type of preaching I suggest you read one or more of Alan Redpath's books or the inspiring books by E B. Meyer. There are many others available but Redpath and Myer both seem to have had the gift to bring powerful truth in a style that is easy to understand.

When undertaking the challenge of preaching a series of sermons it is important that you keep the messages interesting and alive with descriptive language. Don't skimp on preparation and research. Some have and ended up with a dull, running commentary that is sure to put some to sleep and others into the mind-wandering escape mechanism employed regularly by bored listeners.

Preaching a series of sermons does not preclude the preaching of a special message you may feel is necessary for a particular service or special occasion.

Whatever approach you use in developing your sermons it is vitally important that you preach the Word. Your congregation has a desire to know the Bible better. Help them fulfill that desire and you will be fulfilling your calling.

The Bible is a magnificent collection of sacred documents unfolding before us the Divine revelation of our Creator and His awesome plan and provision of salvation freely offered to all humanity.

Discovering the great texts and sermons that are to be found within the sacred perimeters of the Bible is an exciting and challenging adventure.

There are sermons that were preached decades and centuries ago that still resound Holy triumph and victory through the halls of time to those of us living in the last years of the twentieth century.

We are challenged to seek and discover such messages that will break through the veil of darkness that shrouds lost humanity and light the path of some wayward soul, planting within them the seeds of eternal hope.

## **REVIEW THOUGHTS FROM CHAPTER ONE**

- ◆ The Bible is your sermon sourcebook.
- ◆ Establish a regimen of daily Bible reading.
- ◆ As you read take notes to conserve your thoughts.
- ◆ Read a variety of materials, including secular.
- ◆ Leaders are readers.
- ◆ Receive inspiration and ideas from other people's sermons.
- ◆ Plan and preach series of messages.
- ◆ Try preaching through books of the Bible.
- ◆ Discover and preach the great texts of the Bible.

The truly amazing thing about early Christian preaching is that it did not proclaim religious duties or moral standards, or even a reforming program, but a person: One Jesus who was crucified and Whom the Christians knew to be alive. They devoted their energies to understanding Him better and making Him real to people who had never met Him ... Above all it is crucial to recognize that both the content and dynamic of their preaching was the Risen One.

Michael Green - Evangelism In The Early Church

Preaching is a constant agent of the Divine Power by which the greatest miracle God ever works is wrought and

wrought again. God uses it to change lives.

W. Edwin Sangster - The Craft Of Sermon Construction



## 2

### Focusing Your Theme

Have you ever sat through a sermon and when the speaker finished you were left wondering just what it was that he was trying to say? He may have held your attention because of his personality and manner of speaking but no clear message or point was conveyed to you.

A minister recently told me a story about a young boy who attended a church service without his mother. When he returned home his mother asked him: "Did you like the minister and was his sermon good?"

"Oh yes, mother," the boy replied. "He spoke well and his sermon was interesting."

"Wonderful," the mother said, "and what was his sermon about?"

The young lad thought for a moment and then said: "I don't know; he never said." We must be clearly focused on our theme as we prepare and deliver our sermon. A clear presentation of the central truth of the sermon must be evident to our audience.

Sermonizing is not a forty-minute meander through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

Preaching, likewise, is not spraying our audience in "shotgun" fashion with a variety of verses and topics, hoping one will find its target.

Effective preaching is delivering a message from God's Word that is carefully and adequately prepared with a central theme and message that will bring the audience into a clear understanding of Divine truth.

Computers and Bible programs are a great help in sermon preparation and writing but they can also provide a poor substitute for worthwhile and adequate sermon building.

Knowing the human propensity to take the easy way out in any given endeavor, some will sit at their computer, input a topic in the search mode of the Bible program and print out the various verses. They will then align them in some order, insert a few stories or illustrations and call it a sermon.

Is that possible? Probable, but it is a poor substitute for laboring in the Word to find the message God would have you preach the message that will touch the hearts of the people. Most people can tell the difference between a home-cooked meal and a frozen dinner popped into the microwave and served instantly.

The focus of this chapter is on finding the theme or overall direction the sermon will take. The text chosen must yield a topic or central subject to be covered.

You don't want your congregation to go home like the young lad we spoke of, not knowing what it was the preacher was trying to say.

As I begin my investigation of a text I use a letter sized legal pad to make my notes on. Whatever may be your choice of paper or pad, it is important that you make notes as you go.

This is a good place to suggest that it is helpful to work from a reliable study Bible. You may already have a good study Bible but for those who don't, I will recommend several.

There are a number of proven, worthwhile study Bibles, however, the three suggested here have proven a help to many, including myself. They are listed in order of personal preference.

- ◆ The Thompson Chain Reference Bible
- ◆ The New Schofield Reference Bible
- ◆ The New Open Bible

These three study Bibles are available in several different translations. The newer editions also have added features and some minor changes in their format. It will be worth your time to check out other study Bibles along with those suggested.

There have been objections to annotated Bibles because some readers may fail to differentiate between the actual scripture text and the notes added by those preparing the study Bible.

This seems like an unlikely problem for most and should not be reason to preclude the use of study Bibles. However, it would be wise to occasionally remind your congregation that the notes are not inspired scripture, and while they can prove helpful, they remain the teaching and opinions of people.

Your research should begin by reading your text several times including the surrounding verses of that text. Those verses that precede and follow your text are called the "context" The context will give you some understanding of the meaning of your text. When someone extracts a text out of its contextual setting they run the risk of misinterpreting it and possibly misapplying that scripture.

Some wanting to find the correct meaning of a text advocate reading the entire book in which it is found. If your text is in Third John, that is no problem. However, if the text is in Genesis you could have a time problem. Use wisdom and read enough to gain an understanding of the flow of the subject and truth in your text.

This primary investigation should include reading the sermon text in various translations. This will help you to a clearer understanding of the text. In my library I have over two shelves filled with various translations? Once I have my text I go to my translations to read the verses in at least three or four different versions. Almost always, it helps me to see the shades of meaning in the original language and enhances the meaning of the verses.

Of course, when referring to any translation or paraphrased Bible, bear in mind all translations to one degree or another reflect the theological bias and opinion of the translator or translators. Even though most scholars attempt to be objective in their translation, their theological convictions do surface in their work to some degree. However, it is also true that most of the translations are reasonably dependable.

As you are studying your text you will discover key words and phrases that need further research than just comparing them in the various translations. That study will take you into the original languages of the Bible.

The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew and the New Testament was first written in Greek. That fact may seem like a barrier to those who have not had the benefit of training in Biblical languages. However, the fact is, there are many excellent helps that provide understanding and insight in both Hebrew and Greek. Anyone who will use these tools can do quite well in grasping the meaning of the words in the original languages of the Bible.

In your research of words use either Young's or Strong's exhaustive concordance. Both have all the words in the King James Version along with the Hebrew or Greek and a brief translation. There are other concordances for the newer translations.

If you need further information on the key words, use some of the study tools listed in the appendix. Your money is well spent on quality books that cover historical meanings, usage and etymology of Biblical words.

It is also suggested you have a good English dictionary with you as you read and study. Look up any unfamiliar words. Also check some of the key words in your text for further information. You may be surprised at the help it will afford you.

Your investigation should also include finding some basic information regarding the book in which your text is located. When was the book written? Who was the author? To whom was it written? What occasioned the writing?

For example, if you were preaching from the Book of Galatians it would help to know that it was written by the Apostle Paul to the churches in Galatia where he had ministered while on his first missionary journey. After Paul had established the churches there and built a foundation, teaching salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, a certain group of teachers persuaded the believers that salvation was obtained by faith in Christ plus the keeping of the law. They perverted the Gospel and taught that faith plus works equals salvation. Galatians is Paul's attempt to bring the believers back to the truth that salvation is ours by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ.

Knowing these facts helps you understand the setting of that powerful Book which helped fuel the fires of reformation in Luther's day.

Your study Bible, a good Bible dictionary or Bible handbook will give you that basic information on each book of the Bible.

The reading and rereading of your text, checking out word meanings and finding the basic facts mentioned in this chapter should give you enough understanding as to the direction your sermon will take.

Your theme should now be in focus. You should also have made some important notes that will help you in developing your sermon.

Always remember the prime objective in sermon preparation is to find the will and purpose of God in the message. Your investigation is important but if you fail to wait on God for the Holy Spirit's direction you will miss the most important ingredient in preparing a sermon: God's blessing.

God will always honor His Word but how much more effective a sermon is when it is God's message in God's time for His people.

The Prophet Isaiah's words are apropos for all who would speak in His Name:

The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary; He wakeneth morning by morning; He wakeneth my ear to hear like the learned.

## **REVIEW THOUGHTS FROM CHAPTER TWO**

- ◆ The importance of bringing your main theme into focus.
- ◆ Read and reread your text and the context: i.e., the scripture before and after the text.
- ◆ Read your scripture text in several translations.
- ◆ Working from a good study Bible will be a help.
- ◆ Check out the meaning of key words in the original languages.
- ◆ It is critical that you seek God's direction and will regarding the sermon; God's message in God's time.
- ◆ Remember Isaiah 50:4.

And I saw heaven opened and, behold, a white horse; and He that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He doth judge and make war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but He Himself. And He was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood; and His name is called The Word of God.

The Revelation - Chapter 19:11-13, KJV

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth.

The Gospel of John - Chapter 1:1, 14, KJV

### 3 Interpreting Scripture

In his classic allegory **Pilgrim's Progress**, Paul Bunyan depicts Christians journey to the Celestial City and writes of his arrival at the door of Interpreter's house:

"Sir," said Christian, "I am a man that am come from the City of Destruction, and am going to the Mount Zion, and I was told by the man that stands at the gate, at the head of this way, if I call here, you would show me excellent things, such as would be an help to me in my journey.

"Then," said Interpreter, "come in, I will show thee that which will be profitable to thee."

When we prepare and deliver a sermon we are God's "Interpreter." We are His spokesperson emplaning His Word and will to help people, like ourselves, on a pilgrimage to heaven. Our task and solemn responsibility is to discover the truth that God has so graciously given us in His Word and relate that truth to the lives of our congregation.

It is our challenge to "show ... excellent things" and "that which will be profitable" to those "pilgrims" eager to find their way to the "Celestial City."

Interpreting and understanding the Bible is the study of a lifetime. Dedicated ministers and teachers must continue to grow and improve their skills in interpreting the scriptures and in Biblical knowledge.

There are helps and guidelines that assist us in acquiring a better knowledge of how to correctly interpret and apply the scriptures in our sermons. Since this is vital in sermon preparation, this chapter will consider some of those helps.

The science and art of interpreting scripture is called Hermeneutics. It is, for the most part, a set of principles and rules which guide us when interpreting a particular piece of literature. In good Hermeneutics, there is also the interpreter's skill and developed ability to understand what the original author was communicating through words. In the interpreting of scripture it is also essential to rely on the Holy Spirit to gain a knowledge of what is written.

Biblical interpretation involves finding the correct message and content of a passage of scripture. The term for discovering the full and critical meaning of a text is called "exegesis"-finding what is being said in the text. In one sense exegesis is hearing the Bible speak to us. It is the opposite of our forcing a preconceived meaning on a text. Achieving that knowledge, we then are able to expound or explain that truth to our congregation and apply it to their lives. That is preaching.

It is not my intention to become preoccupied with theological terminology, but to establish some understanding of the critical roll which hermeneutics plays in the process of sermon building.

The importance of approaching the preparation of Bible sermons with some knowledge and application of basic guidelines of sound interpretation needs little defense to sincere, thinking preachers or teachers.

I once listened to a speaker spend considerable time attempting to explain the difference between the Holy Spirit and the Holy Ghost as found in the King James Version of the Bible. Had he taken the time to check the English words "ghost" and "spirit," he would have discovered what most of us know - they are both translations of the Greek word *pneuma*. And, of course, when used with "Holy" it refers to the third person of the Trinity, God the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost.

It is understood that the incident mentioned is not a mistake of great consequence. However, in some situations the neglect of sensible rules of interpretation can result in error that critically affects people and deprives them of having the truth that Jesus said would set them free.

Moving from the premise that correct Bible interpretation is essential to preparing effective sermons, we offer some simple guidelines and suggestions that should be of help to you.

The beginning point and foundation of interpreting scripture is to view the Bible as God inspired literature and interpret it as such. The Bible literally "means what it says" and "says what it means" It is God conveying to humanity His message of love and salvation through Jesus Christ.

Given the fact that the sixty-six books of the Bible contain various genres or types of literature such as prose, poetry, parabolic, allegorical, historical or prophetic, they must be read and understood in their literal sense.

For example, the parable contains a central and important truth conveyed to us in story form. To look for hidden and veiled truth in every word or sentence of the parable is a mistake and has led some to develop erroneous doctrines out of a story that was given to convey or illustrate a single, but vital, truth.

The Bible is not a mysterious book with a cryptic, secret message, understood only by those gifted with special insight and revelation knowledge.

While the basic approach to interpreting the Bible should be literal, it is important to mention the extremes practiced by many of the Hebrew teachers and later carried over into Christian hermeneutics; the practice of hyper literalism or letterism. Bernard Ramm, in his classic book on Biblical Interpretation, suggests:

There is one major lesson to be learned from rabbinical exegesis: the evils of letterism. In the exaltation of the very letters of the Scripture the true meaning of the Scripture was lost. The incidental is so exaggerated as to obscure the essential. Any exegesis will go astray which bogs itself down in the trivialities and letterism.

The wonderful truth is that believers can read the Bible and know that they will be able to understand the message. It can be accepted literally and as we study the Word, the riches of Divine truth will be ours.

Two of the great truths that emerged from the reformation are: each believer has a right and ability to interpret the Scriptures and that the Bible interprets the Bible.

The church at the time of the reformation, for the most part, engaged in interpreting scripture by spiritualizing it or seeing it as an allegory, i.e., " a representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms; figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another." They believed the Bible to be a book that could only be understood and interpreted by a select few (clergy) who understood the mystical and veiled meaning of Scripture. The common believer was not encouraged and often forbidden to read and interpret the Bible.

The return of the Bible to the people and the understanding that the Scriptures could be comprehended and interpreted from a literal aspect brought about dynamic change in the church. Reformation truth has stripped away the mysterious and ominous trappings of ecclesiastical domination. The Bible was back in the hands of the believer to be read and understood.

Despite the clear lessons of history there are those today who ignore the plain and literal meaning of Scripture and assign a spiritualized or allegorical meaning to much of it. Doctrines are built or invented on supposed revelations which result in serious difficulties, misinformation and errors that often have tragic consequences in the lives of precious souls for whom Jesus died.

History is replete with poignant examples of deluded and arrogant purveyors of cultish, self-serving doctrines wrenched from the sacred confines of Holy Scripture.

Because of the present proliferation of false and adulterated teaching masquerading as the "true Gospel," we

have a great challenge laid at our doorstep. Sound Biblical teaching and preaching is the need of our time.

Since a great deal of error in interpretation comes out of going beyond what is the obvious meaning of a text and looking for a plurality of meaning and interpretation, you need to ask some questions before assigning a text another meaning. Questions such as:

- ◆ If the scripture does not mean what it literally says, why is the meaning veiled or hidden?
- ◆ How do we determine when to view a scripture as plural in meaning and, therefore, look beyond the obvious interpretation?
- ◆ When you leave the literal and obvious meaning of a text, how do you decide what allegorical or spiritual interpretation to assign it?

Leaving the literal sense and interpretation of a text without careful consideration and caution is precarious business. In many cases it is an opportunity for a person to have free reign to attach whatever significance to a text that they determine is appropriate and fits their doctrine.

No doubt this warning of the possible pitfalls of spiritualizing a text or interpreting it allegorically is to some tantamount to being unspiritual and lacking in "revelation knowledge."

Nevertheless, let this be a flag of caution that such practices are often as foolish and hazardous as building a house on sand.

Don't confuse spiritualizing a text with making a spiritual application of scriptural truth to the present time and people. There is plenty of room and necessity for applying a given text to the audience.

However, bear in mind that the validity of that application will still be the result of working from the premise of sound Bible interpretation.

The following ten principles are offered to serve as a guide to competent, sound interpretation of a text:

1. Consider the type of Biblical literature you are dealing with, i.e., prose, poetry, historical, narrative, parable, allegory or apocalyptic such as the book of Revelation where you find symbols used.
2. Find who wrote the book your text is located in, when it was written, to whom it was written and what occasioned the writing.
3. Consider who is speaking in the verses of your text. In Scriptures there are a number of voices. Even some of Satan's words are found, such as those spoken to God in Job and in the temptation, the dialogue between Jesus and Satan. In Job, there is some of the questionable counsel and conclusions spoken to suffering Job by his dear friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. I hope my point is clear; find out who is speaking in the text.
4. Research the historical and cultural setting of your verses. Such information will help you to better understand the context of the subject matter and therefore will assist in the interpretation.
5. Check key words of the text in the original language (Greek or Hebrew) to determine their contemporary usage and shades of meaning that may not be apparent in the English. Also consider the syntax; the sentence structure.
6. Acquaint yourself with the contextual setting of the text. Read the verses before and after the text. There is a flow of thought that you need to discover.
7. Avoid fragmenting the Scripture and irresponsibility using words and statements out of context. Legitimate interpretation and exposition of scripture requires careful consideration of the context.
8. Check the cross references of your text. Find what other verses relate to your text. Scripture interprets Scripture.
9. Compare your interpretation with reliable commentaries on the Scripture you are working with. Preferably, use several different sources.

10. Always keep in mind that God inspired the Bible. Pray and trust Him to help you and open your understanding as you study and labor in interpreting a text.

Paul Bunyan was a man of great spiritual insight. When he wrote of Christian's journey to the Celestial City, he brought Christian by "Interpreter's" house to learn of those things that would help him. We must keep that in mind as we minister the Word to the many "Pilgrims" who will stop by to learn of us "excellent things, such as would be an help to (them) in (their) journey."

A great responsibility, but a great joy and reward as well.

### **REVIEW THOUGHTS FROM CHAPTER THREE**

- ◆ Hermeneutics is the science or principals of Bible interpretation.
- ◆ Interpreting and understanding the Bible is the study of a lifetime.
- ◆ General rule: Interpret the Bible literally.
- ◆ Effective Bible preaching requires the knowledge and application of the rules of sound Bible interpretation.
- ◆ Reformation truth: each believer has the right to interpret the scriptures; the Bible interprets the Bible.
- ◆ Avoid interpreting Scripture through allegory or spiritualizing a text without careful consideration.
- ◆ Building sermons with sound Bible interpretation requires labor and diligence but bears fruit in people's lives.
- ◆ We are God's "Interpreters" chosen to show others the way to the "Celestial City."

Preaching is the proclamation of the good news of salvation through man to men. Its two constituent elements are - a man and a message-truth and personality.

William Evans - How To Prepare Gospel Addresses

Great Movements in the Church have normally been initiated and developed by preaching. Revival has invariably come by preaching. By preaching, it may confidently be anticipated, it will come again.

W. Edwin Sangster - The Craft of Sermon Construction

## Organizing the Message

Organization is to some like the cartoon that depicts two men sitting at the table slouched down with hands folded and their feet on the table; the caption reads: "Tomorrow we'll get organized."

When it comes to sermon preparation, organization is not an unspiritual word. Genesis tells us that God organized the creation of our world into a six-day schedule. It is also important to discuss the organization of your creation, your sermon.

Up to this point you have established your theme and set the direction you intend to go with the sermon. Now it is time to lay out a basic outline. This outline will be the blueprint or plan for the message.

Some have argued for sermonizing that requires only a scripture text and then relies on impromptu thoughts and ideas. This is passed off as "inspiration," when in reality it usually is the product of a lazy, undisciplined mind.

Those who refuse to organize and outline their sermons are often doomed to verbal meandering through a sea of repetitious and disconnected thoughts.

How much better it is to develop a logical, clear statement of your subject and scripture text as you arrange your sermon in an easy-to-follow outline.

Keep in mind that your outline is your sermon plan. Your outline and sermon plan will include:

- ◆ The text
- ◆ An introduction
- ◆ Main body of sermon material divided into three to five points with sub-points as needed;
- ◆ The conclusion.

Many find three main points in the sermon body easiest to work with. Three points will be used to illustrate the sermon structure, however, it is not intended to infer that only three-point sermons will be blessed. Experiment and find the best for you.

As you begin writing out your first outline, remember that you can adjust it later as your sermon develops. It is important to establish a simple outline as soon as possible.

Write down your main thoughts under Roman numerals I, II and III. As you do this you may end up with more points than your main outline headings allow for. The extra points can be combined with your three strongest points or possibly used as sub-points designated by Arabic numerals 1, 2, 3, etc. If you need to go a step further in your outline I suggest you use the alphabet, A, B, C and so on.

As you are arranging this basic outline it is important to find the natural flow of your text and subject matter. This will be of great help to you as you preach the message. The audience will also be helped in understanding and remembering what they have heard.

The ability to find the flow will come as you study your text. Some have a more inherent ability in this area. However, through practice and study, everyone can acquire a sense of direction in expounding a text so that people will grasp the truth that is there.

Let me give you an example. If you were preaching from Hebrews, the fourth chapter, verses fourteen through sixteen, your sermon could follow the theme of Christ's priestly ministry and our access to the Father's throne. You could use the following outline:

- I. The Priest; verses 14, 15.
- II. The Place; verse 16a.
- III. The Promise; verse 16b.

The natural flow is easy to see and remember; The Priest, Jesus Christ; The Place, the Throne of God; The Promise, to find help in the time of need.

In our example, the outline followed the exact order of verses in the text but that is not always going to be so. Find the best order that will communicate the message. Find the flow.

There are times when adjusting the order of your outline will help in clarity and understanding. Allow yourself the freedom of experimenting with the order and presentation of your sermon.

As you are constructing your sermon outline bear in mind that your first and last points need to be strong.

The first point should interest and involve your audience in the message. The final point must be strong to affirm the main point and theme of your sermon. That doesn't mean that the middle of your sermon is a place for dull and uninteresting material to find expression. It means that you need a good beginning and ending to what should be an engaging sermon that will keep the people's attention.

Interesting illustrations, anecdotes and relevant application of your points to the lives of your audience will prove vital to keeping their interest and attention.

It is not effective or wise to spend valuable time giving information to people that they neither want or need.

All good preaching will contain valuable teaching, but bear in mind that the primary objective of a sermon is to proclaim truth and bring about a decision for righteousness. While it is a worthy objective of preaching to touch the intellect, we must not forget that touching the emotion and soul will bring a commitment to God and the truth of His Word.

It is important, at this stage, to consider the type of sermon you are preparing. By type of sermon I mean structure, not the subject matter or occasion of the message.

There are three basic types of sermons we will consider: topical, textual and expository.

The topical sermon is a message based on a particular subject found in the realm of Biblical truth. The topic may concern Christian doctrine, ethics, the believer's life and ministry, etc.

In a topical sermon you choose the subject. For example, the subject or topic might be "Justification by Faith." You could use the text found in the book of Habakkuk: "The just shall live by his faith."

Having established the topic and text you could then proceed by checking your concordance and the cross references in your study Bible. In this case you will find the text in Habakkuk quoted in the New Testament in three places: Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; and Hebrews 10:38. As you check further you will find other supporting verses that will help in explaining the teaching of justification by Faith.

Doctrine books and studies are set up topically. If you were to seek help from a book on doctrine you would look up the subject heading "Soteriology" or "The Doctrine of Salvation."

A textual sermon is different from a topical sermon in that the message is confined more to a particular text. That text would not only provide the topic but also the material for the main points of your sermon.

Let's use the same theme and approach it from a textual sermon structure. Using Ephesians, chapter two, verses eight through ten, the main headings of your sermon could be:

- I. Saving Grace; verse eight.
- II. Religious Folly (Man's attempt by works); verse nine.
- III. The Christian's Lifestyle; verse ten.

Under each main heading you could develop your argument and teaching by bringing other scriptures to enlarge on the text. These supporting verses may be explained and commented on in developing the sermon and theme.

While you may use other portions of scripture, your main points should come from the scripture you have chosen as a text.

For some a text is merely a launching pad that is read at the beginning of the sermon, never to be mentioned again. In these cases it is pure presumption to attempt to dignify random speculations with a Biblical text.

Preach the Word and God will honor it, with results.

The third type of sermon we will consider is the expository sermon. In an expository sermon you deal with an extended number of verses and at times with an entire chapter. The aim is exposition of a text to bring out its meaning and application. The approach is inductive; i.e., we reach a general conclusion by considering the various facts that are found in the text.

Therefore, the majority of the truth and argument comes from the text. In both the topical and textual sermon you go outside of the text for supporting material and explanation. You might say the text suggests a general conclusion and you seek evidence to support that conclusion.

In the expository sermon you may use other verses to illustrate or support a truth found in the text but you should not enlarge on those supporting verses. You will confine yourself for the most part to the sermon text. That text will give birth to your theme, subject, main points and sub-points of your sermon.

Following the same subject used in the examples of topical and textual sermon structures, you could preach



from Galatians, chapter three, verses one through fourteen. As you study that text you can see the error that came into the churches of Galatia. As we mentioned in chapter two, the false teachers had deceived the Galatian believers by insisting they keep the law to obtain salvation. Paul's argument in these verses is powerful, and as you understand the truth found in these verses you come to the conclusion: "The just shall live by faith."

Expository preaching allows the Bible to speak to us. It helps in controlling the temptation to bring our ideas to the Bible for Scriptural endorsement.

The thoughts on expository preaching are not given to negate or diminish the importance and value of topical and textual sermons but rather to show the value and importance of Biblical preaching. All three sermon structures have their value and place.

Not many preachers start out with expository sermons but it is worth your time and effort to read some of the great expository sermons that have been preserved for us in books. Spend some time studying the expository method and purpose to develop your ability to use the expository sermon some of the time. Your effort will be rewarded. Your preaching will be Biblical and your people will develop a hunger for the Word.

Regardless of the sermon structure you use it is important to have a clear, logical outline of your sermon material.

Your sermon outline is your blueprint, your plan. Now you must fill that sermon structure with material that will inspire, feed and build up your congregation.

## **REVIEW THOUGHTS FROM CHAPTER FOUR**

- ◆ Your sermon outline is your blueprint or plan for the message being prepared.
- ◆ You are organizing your thoughts from the text.
- ◆ Your outline will include:
  - The text;
  - Introduction;
  - Main body of material; main and sub-points;
  - Conclusion.
- ◆ Find the natural flow of your text and sermon material.
- ◆ Three types of sermons: Topical; Textual; Expository.
- ◆ A clear, logical outline and presentation of sermon is vital to its effectiveness.

Sermons should have real teaching in them, and their doctrine should be substantial and abundant. We do not enter the pulpit to talk for talk's sake; we have instructions to convey, important to the last degree, and we cannot afford to utter pretty nothings.

Charles H. Spurgeon - Lectures To My Students

There are many students who never get past the vestibules of any subject. There is a reason for that, of course. To get into the heart of any subject requires work, study, discipline; and it is not every student who is prepared to pay that price.

The result is that there are many of them who never get past the fringes of any subject, and who never arrive at the inner treasury. It takes work to get beyond the vestibule of the riches of Scripture.

William Barclay - Through The Year

## 5

### Putting Meat on the Bones

Good preaching does not just happen.

Sermon preparation that produces good preaching requires work, sweat and a heart that can be touched by the needs of the people.

Preachers develop and preaching develops, both requiring time and labor in study.

Of course, it is a labor that brings great reward and a gratifying sense of accomplishment. Paul spoke of that reward to Timothy when he wrote:

Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the Word and doctrine.

Putting meat on the bones of your sermon requires concentrated effort. Having selected your text and theme, worked out a basic outline of three to five main points, it is time for further study and research.

At this point your sermon could fly, though it would be much like the 1903 flight of the Wright brothers' first airplane - not very high and not very far.

Some gifted communicators could ad-lib along, but in time it would be evident to most that the sermon was still in the experimental stage. Flying, but not very high and not very far.

Make a commitment to be liberal in the time you spend in study. Avoid the temptation to rush a sermon through the preparation process. Don't let your sermon preparation become a "bothersome necessity."

It is a sad commentary on modern preaching that some ministers are quite content with having "just something" to preach. Often they delight in parroting someone else's sermon and claiming it as their own.

Let your sermons be your sermons. They should be the product of time spent in your personal study and research. Not every sermon will be a masterpiece of homiletical genius, but every message should reflect the minister's concern and respect for Biblical truth and its application to the lives of the congregation.

I know, the time factor enters the picture. However, that only emphasizes the importance of establishing priorities. As mentioned earlier, we must not let the multitude of ministerial activities rob us of valuable sermon preparation time.

Feeding the sheep must be a high priority. Jesus' words to Peter on the subject are clear enough and spoken thrice: Simon, . . . lowest thou Me more than these?

... Feed My lambs.

Simon , .... lovest thou Me?

... Feed My sheep.

Simon, son of Jonah, lowest thou Me?

... Feed My sheep.

The message is clear enough.

Roll up your sleeves; it is time to go to work on putting meat on the skeleton of the sermon you have developed.

Let's again review our progress in preparing a sermon:

- ◆ The Scripture text and theme have been chosen.
- ◆ Preliminary investigation of the text or topic has been accomplished and notes made.
- ◆ The first draft of your sermon outline has been completed.

With your outline and notes for reference you can further develop your sermon theme and expand the material for the message.

At this point I want to mention that it helps me to work from a legal pad and use a page for each major point in my sermon. That way I can put facts, reference verses, illustrations and such under each point. Usually, I will end up with more material than I can use, but it is easy to condense the subject matter as I rewrite my outline and notes.

When developing a sermon, several objectives should be considered:

- ◆ Find the thrust and main emphasis of the text.
- ◆ Correct interpretation of your Scripture verses.
- ◆ Illustrations for your main points.
- ◆ Application of the message to the listener.

The search for additional information on your subject and text could begin with your files. Most speakers find it helpful to collect various articles and materials on subjects they may deal with in the future.

For those who have not established a system for gathering information and materials, the following suggestions are offered.

Begin with a simple topical file using letter-size manila file folders or file pockets. A two or four-drawer metal filing cabinet is recommended. For those on a slim budget there are less expensive cardboard files that are adequate for filing your materials.

In these files you can topically arrange articles from magazines, newspapers, etc. Use a set of alphabetical file guides so you can easily locate your material; for example, articles on children would be filed under "C" materials on evangelism under "E," and so on.

The filing of quotes and anecdotes can be done on three by five cards. Small files for index cards are inexpensive, convenient and easy to use. The important thing is to develop a system to keep track of the material you have collected.

There are more sophisticated and expensive filing systems available, but for most of us it is better to keep it simple and easy to use.

A system of filing is essential. Some of us have struggled with a "pile" system of collecting material; we pile it here or there and then try to remember which pile a certain article or piece of information is in. Give up; it's a losing battle. The stacks of material soon become unmanageable. Start a filing system of some sort. Remember, you will either file or pile; better to file.

After searching your files for related materials and illustrations it is time to re-examine your sermon text. Read the verses again along with the context. As suggested previously, it is very important to see your text in the light of its contextual setting. This will assist you greatly in determining the correct interpretation and meaning of your sermon text.

Seeing your text in its contextual setting will help you understand and follow the flow of truth running through the sacred documents we call the Bible. The Books of the Bible were not written as fragmented thoughts thrown together to compose a written document. We must not fragment and, therefore, alter the meaning of Divine revelation. As you read and study your text refer to the notes from your preliminary investigation.

At this point it will help to refer to your commentaries, Bible dictionaries or encyclopedias. The value of these tools cannot easily be overstated. In these volumes you have the experience, insight and accumulated years of scholarship of proven and established writers.

By consulting a number of different works on a text or subject you can compare them and arrive at better understanding of what the correct interpretation is and what the Bible is teaching.

Of course, it will be necessary to choose reliable writers who work from the premise that the Bible is God's Word and is the valid, accepted source of all doctrine and truth.

The Bible not only contains truth, the Bible is truth.

To ensure that you select quality commentaries that will help you in study, do some careful research before you purchase.

When selecting commentaries for your library, keep in mind that the devotional commentaries tend to give you more of what the writer feels the text is saying and how it applies to life situations. Some are classics, such as Matthew Henry, and even though written many years ago, they remain an important source of help and inspiration today in teaching and preaching.

There are also many excellent commentaries available that focus more on the exegesis and exposition of the Scriptures. The cultural and historical settings are considered and information on key words and syntax from the original languages is brought out. Many of the newer volumes published supply important information on recent scholarship and archeological discoveries. This up-to-date and detailed information is a great value in studying a text for preaching.

Again, it is important to choose judiciously the sources of your study material. Avoid material from ultra-liberal

theologians who seem to delight in dissecting and tearing apart the Bible in the name of scholarship. By the time they are finished you will have precious little to hang your faith on.

Paul described such men as: Always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.

One help in locating good study material is to inquire of those whom you know to be more experienced in the ministry. Ask them to recommend commentaries and study books they have found to be helpful and sound in doctrine, and then examine them yourself before buying.

After you have researched your text in various commentaries, it may prove helpful to again read your text in several different Bible translations. Sometimes a certain translation of a word or phrase will lend a poignant emphasis to your thought.

The time spent in reading and comparing various materials on your text will help you avoid the mistake of misinterpreting the scripture. It is work, but well worth the time and effort.

As you develop the various points of truth in your sermon, it is important to remember the value and need for good illustration.

It has been said that illustrations are the windows of your sermon. They bring light to your subject and bring truth into clearer focus for the listener.

It is important that the people you are speaking to are able to clearly understand the truth you are presenting. Good, interesting illustrations and anecdotes will facilitate the goal of clear and effective communication.

People love a good story, so make full use of that open door to their understanding.

Jesus used many illustrations and stories from life in the first century to convey truth. He spoke from life situations and known facts to bring them into the arena of Divine Truth.

A note of caution regarding illustrations: don't use them to merely entertain people or to demonstrate your cleverness.

The sermon should not be an endless stream of stories and illustrations, interspersed with verses of scripture to add Biblical color. Some have worked hard to find a Bible text to accommodate a sensational illustration they have discovered.

Illustrations serve to assist us in bringing clarity to the scriptural topic and truth you are presenting. They do not stand alone.

Along the line of illustrations and anecdotes it is worthwhile to mention that humor, used with discretion and in the right place, can be of value in preaching. We are not called to be stand-up comedians but a little humor can be a valuable tool in communicating a message to people. I prefer humor that is more natural than telling a joke. Life affords many humorous situations so it should not be difficult to bring some humor into your message at the right time. There are sermons where humor would be totally out of place. Use wisdom.

As you look for illustrations and anecdotes for your sermon, I suggest the following list of possible sources:

- ◆ Experiences from everyday life. Keep a notebook or journal and write down what you see and hear.
- ◆ Your personal reading. The quotations in this book are from my personal reading. Use your cards to write down those nuggets you find reading and file them.
- ◆ The Bible. The Bible not only interprets the Bible, it also illustrates the truths it contains.
- ◆ Illustration books. You may find some good material in the illustration books but often the material lacks the force of what you experience in life.

Experienced speakers are usually quick to pick up on a good illustration as they go about the business of living.

The use of illustrations in sermons preached in other nations and cultures requires some special thought. The illustrations or humorous anecdotes you use in your own nation and culture may have meaning but in other cultures they may not relate at all.

For example, it would do little good to speak of the crowded freeways of Los Angeles to someone in a rural, third-world setting. Let your illustrations be in the context of their culture or a frame of reference that is universal in human experience.

After making each point of truth in your sermon, on and illustrating it as needed for clear understanding, you need to give attention to the application of that truth.

Application is bringing into focus how the message you are preaching applies to the lives of your audience. Relating what you have preached to your congregation is critical to the success of your sermon.

Without application, a message is to some degree an abstract religious dissertation. It remains a lecture on a

Biblical subject.

What good is a truth learned if it cannot be applied to a person's life experience? It is knowledge but it is not experienced. Truth must be learned, applied and experienced.

The Book of James instructs us:

Only be sure you act on the message, and do not merely listen.

In many cases people don't understand what to do because no one has explained the Word to them. Application is bringing that direction to people's lives.

When Philip the evangelist spoke to the Ethiopian eunuch who was reading Isaiah, he asked him:

"Do you understand what you are reading?"

The Ethiopian eunuch replied:

"How can I, unless someone guides me."

Philip then proceeded to explain the Prophet Isaiah to him and applied the message to his life. The result? The Ethiopian eunuch was converted to Christ and immediately baptized in water.

It is critical that before you leave the house of sermonizing you show the people how your message applies to their sphere of living and how it will help them.

The Bible is timeless. Its message brings direction and meaning to present day life situations. It is the Divine remedy for the many ills that plague humanity in the closing years of this second millennium, A.D.

Apply its healing balm to the wounded souls of those who hear you speak.

All effective preaching should flow from a heart of compassion and love. Preaching with a hidden agenda of venting animosity against individuals or the congregation as a whole is bound to produce little more than strife and spiritual barrenness.

There is an old threadbare cliché that applies:

"The Bible says feed the sheep, not beat the sheep."

It is also true that sheep that are well fed seldom wander off to other pastures.

## **REVIEW THOUGHTS FROM CHAPTER FIVE**

- ◆ Putting meat on the bones of your sermon will require disciplined study and concentrated effort.
- ◆ The pastor's highest priority: Feed the Sheep.
- ◆ Search your files for relevant materials. If you have no filing system, begin one.
- ◆ Spend time, again, reading and understanding the contextual setting of your text verses.
- ◆ Refer to your commentaries and other study books that deal with your text. Use several different sources.
- ◆ Find interesting illustrations and anecdotes that relate to your main points of truth.
- ◆ Humor can be an asset to your message. Use care that your humor is not frivolous, excessive or inappropriate.
- ◆ Develop a clear and beneficial application of your sermon to the lives of your congregation.
- ◆ Using your sermon to vent personal animosity will prove counterproductive to the true aims of Bible preaching.
- ◆ Sheep that are well fed seldom wander off.

I have a conviction that no sermon is ready for preaching, not ready for writing out, until we can express its theme in a short, pregnant sentence as clear as crystal. I find the getting of that sentence is the hardest, the most exacting, and the most fruitful labor in my study.

J. H. Jowett - The Preacher: His Life And Work

Every sermon has meaning and value only when it is the result of personal spiritual experience and knowledge. Every sermon pronounced only with our lips is dead and false and those who listen always unmistakably feel it.

Philip Saliba - Feed My Sheep

## 6

### Beginnings and Endings

Tuning a piano is a laborious and time-consuming task, but what a difference it makes in the final outcome of the artist's performance.

The fine tuning and setting of a true pitch on the instrument is a critical part of the overall musical presentation.

What is true of a musical instrument is also true of a sermon. It needs to be fine tuned. Let your spiritual ear pick up the right pitch and tone.

The sermon outline prepared earlier now needs to be rewritten. The introduction and conclusion will be added along with additional sub-points derived from further study of the text. The subpoints will include your illustrations and points of application.

Remember that the main points of your sermon can be rearranged if you discover a better order and flow to the message. The order of your outline points does not necessarily have to correspond to the order of the verses of scripture in your text.

This point was covered earlier but is repeated here to encourage you to find the natural flow of your material and present the subject matter in a creative manner. People will retain much more of your message as a result of your efforts.

Simplicity and clarity are worthy goals in sermon preparation. You are usually preaching to people with a wide range of Christian experience and spiritual growth. Some are new in the faith; others are mature Christians. Aim at getting your message through to the youngest of your listeners and the older saints will, more than likely, compliment you on your sermon.

Don't confuse simplicity with shallowness and superficiality. Simplicity, in the context of this writing, has to do with preparing and presenting your material in a manner that makes the message clear and intelligible to all who listen.

Dr. J. Vernon McGee, in a book on sermon preparation, writes of a very scholarly minister who possessed the ability to make profound teachings of theology understandable to ordinary people. Dr. McGee asked him for his secret. His answer was:

In the preparation of the sermon every effort should be made to obtain simplicity-then go over the sermon the second time to reduce it to the simplest common denominator. Go over the sermon again and again until you are ashamed of its simplicity, then preach the sermon so that the children can understand it.... It is difficult to make the message too simple.

After rewriting your sermon outline, you need to consider how you will begin and end your message. The introduction and the conclusion of a sermon are crucial elements, worthy of careful consideration and planning.

Let's begin with the beginning, your introduction. I prefer waiting until the sermon is completed to add the introduction. That allows me to view the entire main body of the sermon and then decide how I want to introduce my audience to the message.

The introduction of your sermon is of the utmost importance. It should be brief and state the theme of your message.

It has been suggested that you sum up your main theme in one descriptive sentence. That is a challenge, but well worth the time and effort expended.

In any case, avoid lengthy introductions. Make your introduction concise, to the point and interesting.

This beginning point of your sermon is the hook to capture the attention and interest of your audience. If you fail to arouse their interest and ramble on trying to find the way into your subject, you may lose them and find it difficult to recapture their attention.

Spend time on developing an arresting and engaging opening to your sermon.

The ending of your message is of equal importance and should be your final touch, the last brush stroke on the spoken sermon portrait you are painting.

Brevity, again, is a virtue to strive for. The conclusion of a sermon is not the place for a point-by-point recap of all you have preached.

Knowing when to conclude a sermon is also a skill worth cultivating. Some speakers promise you a conclusion several times before they finally deliver it.

Decisions are made regarding your message in these ending words and thoughts. You must keep the audience with you.

- ◆ Your conclusion may include the following:
- ◆ A concise, to the point, restatement of the theme.
- ◆ A story or illustration relating to the main thrust of your sermon.
- ◆ The use of a poem can be effective as long as it serves to reinforce the main point of your sermon.
- ◆ A portion of scripture that is apropos for your sermon. It would be most effective if quoted rather than read.

The conclusion of your sermon could be likened to the summation given by an attorney in the closing moments of a trial in a court of law.

Picture yourself as the attorney. You have studied, prepared and argued your case to the best of your ability. Now you have a brief few minutes before the jury to convince them to decide in favor of your client and case.

The words of that closing argument would be carefully chosen and skillfully presented. The difference is, the attorney is arguing for short-lived matters confined to the perimeters of time and earthly existence.

You, on the other hand, are contending for decisions that are eternal and heavenly. You are preaching to influence eternal souls, precious and eternal.

Pray much over the summation and ending of your sermon.

Leave your audience with a clear picture of the issues they must confront and decide upon.

As you are fine tuning your sermon, bear in mind that your preparation for preaching is spiritual as well as intellectual. Bathe your message in prayer and meditation. Take dominion over the opposing forces of darkness. Petition heaven for God's blessing on the message and in the service. Intercede for the people you are about to preach to.

Review your sermon just before you preach it. Plan an hour or so in your study on Saturday evening. You need to have a fresh grasp on the message you are about to deliver to the congregation.

Sometimes, in reviewing a sermon I'm about to preach, I will do some additional reading on the text. Perhaps read the scripture again in various translations. If an additional thought comes I'll write it into the notes.

Dr. Wilbur M. Smith, writing about the ministry of Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, speaks of the fact that Dr. Morgan was a man who believed in hard work and spending time meditating on God's Word. He relates a story regarding Dr. Morgan ministering at one of the great Northfield Conferences. He states that when Dr. Morgan was scheduled to speak at ten o'clock on a subject he had brilliantly unfolded twenty years before, he could be observed at six o'clock in the morning in the garden near his cottage sitting at a table, giving another two hours of meditation and thought to his text.

It is little wonder that G. Campbell Morgan's books, sermons and ministry have had and continue to have great impact on countless thousands of people hungry for the truth of God's Word.

The reviewing ritual may differ with each minister and speaker, but review you must. Many find it helpful to use a highlight pen to mark key words and statements in the sermon notes. This could be done while you review the sermon.

Read and reread your sermon material until you become very familiar with it. The better you know the material in your sermon the greater freedom and ease you will enjoy as you deliver the message.

When you stand before an audience that is waiting in anticipation for the spoken word of God's message, it is a good feeling to know you are ready.

## **REVIEW THOUGHTS FROM CHAPTER SIX**

- ◆ Fine tuning your message involves rewriting your sermon outline and adding the introduction and conclusion.
- ◆ Simplicity and clarity are worthy goals in sermon preparation.
- ◆ Your introduction should be brief and interesting.
- ◆ The ending or conclusion of your sermon is vital.
- ◆ Decisions are made regarding your message as you bring the sermon to a close.
- ◆ In fine tuning your message give attention to the spiritual aspect of your sermon. Seek God's direction and blessing.
- ◆ Develop your reviewing ritual. Always go over your sermon and know your material.

It is often said that people judge you during the first five seconds of simply looking at you, and again during the first five seconds after you begin to speak.

Lillian Brown - Your Public Best

Today we're all tuned to receive information much more quickly, and we get bored in a hurry if things slow down. The video age has sped up our cognitive powers. We get to the point faster.. People who watch the evening news see entire South American cities collapse under earthquakes in sixty seconds or less. So if you're just talking for sixty seconds, you'd better be good and interesting... In today's society, long-winded people will soon be as extinct as the dinosaur. You have to be punchy and graphic in your conversation-at least some of the time-to hold people's interest.

Roger Ailes - You Are The Message

## 7

### **You are On Stage**

Men have a peculiar bent in their nature when it comes to driving to a new or difficult place to find. We simply don't like to stop and ask for directions or even refer to a road map. After all, our ancestors were explorers and mighty hunters who knew their way around without a street atlas.

Only when all else fails and we are hopelessly lost will we seek directions and consult a road map.

Maybe it's pride or stubbornness. Whatever the reason, we must not preach as one driving with no sure direction, trying first one street and then another, hoping that perchance it is the right choice.

When you stand before an audience it is essential that you be well prepared. Know where you are going.

Have your street atlas, i.e., sermon outline, before you to guide you unerringly to the correct destination.

Follow your outline.

Have it committed to memory if possible but have the outline with you in case you get lost.

Don't be obvious in using your sermon outline. Avoid reading it point by point; "Now under point 3-A, we will consider....."

Endeavor to be natural in ministering your subject. Affected mannerisms, more often than not, detract from the message. It seems that preaching has run the gamut from the wimpy, syrupy, religious jargon to the window-rattling, bombastic, circus barker.

There is room for a wide range of style and volume in public speaking that is appealing, interesting and communicates strongly the message and convictions of the speaker. Accepting as valid the thought that preaching is bringing truth through personality, you must develop your own style of speaking.

You must also remember that preaching is proclamation. The voice of the messenger must be heard clearly and like the voice of a trumpet summons people to address the issues being proclaimed.

Unless you are a gifted communicator, it will require time, work and study to develop skill and style in preaching.

Listening to accomplished and effective communicators can be of great help to you in developing an effective style of speaking. Of course, it is not suggested that you mimic other speakers but that you find pointers that will help you communicate.

As you listen to outstanding speakers you will notice that the tone and volume of their voice is easy to listen to. They are not shouting so loud that your eardrums are in danger, nor are they mumbling so low you cannot hear half of what they are saying. You will also note that they vary the pitch of their voice instead of speaking in a boring monotone. They enunciate clearly; there are well-timed pauses.

Books are available on public speaking that can be invaluable to those interested in improving their speaking ability.

A suggestion that will help you see where you need to improve in your speaking is to record several of your sermons and listen to them. The first time I listened to my voice on a tape that I recorded for a radio broadcast I could not believe how I sounded. It was revealing and educational to say the least. Try it sometime.



It is not unspiritual to seek to improve your voice and speaking ability. After all, the point of preaching is to convey a valuable message to humanity.

When preaching your message it is important that your sermon outline and structured message not hinder you from expressing a fresh thought that might come to you while you are speaking. Sometimes God gives a word of wisdom or knowledge in that manner. That word or thought can be a blessing to the audience and may even be critical to someone in a desperate situation.

However, exercise wisdom, and don't leave the flow of your message to follow such an inspiration beyond what was intended as just a word or single thought. Stay with your sermon plan.

The important point is: structure with freedom of expression. Yes, you can have both. Regulating your preaching time is important.

Remember the old comedy routine where the performer is either too corny or long-winded and a large hook appears from behind the curtain to pull him from the stage?

Well, they don't do that do that to tiresome, boring, long-winded preachers, but they do have other ways of showing their displeasure. Like drifting off to dreamland, walking out early or not returning to hear the speaker again.

There are no commandments against having a timepiece on the pulpit while you preach. Keep track of your preaching time.

In the beginning stages of your ministry, twenty-five to thirty minutes is about right. As your preaching develops you may find that forty to forty-five minutes is better. However, remember the hook.

It is far better to be a little brief than to be a little long in your sermon time. Leave your audience with the feeling of being fed a good spiritual meal rather than leaving the table stuffed with an overabundance of facts, stories and repetitious statements.

Be aware of the fact that some thirty-minute sermons can seem like an eternity, while an interesting forty-five minute message can seem like a brief few minutes.

The difference is usually what you present and how you present it.

Be interesting.

Use word pictures.

Look and sound alive.

Establish eye contact with your audience.

Smile once in awhile and look like you really are preaching the Gospel - "good news" It is not a sin to be happy.

The quote by Lillian Brown from her interesting book, **Your Public Best**, that appears in the beginning of this chapter, is a sobering thought. She writes: "It is often said that people judge you during the first five seconds of simply looking at you."

If that is true, we should be concerned about our demeanor and how we look when the stage lights go on and the curtain parts and all eyes are upon us as the spokesperson of the hour.

Our personal appearance should reflect our position and calling as an ambassador. We are God's messengers with God's message.

Again, a video recording of one of your "performances" might be quite revealing to you. Of course, by performance we mean one of your services and sermons. Feel brave? Try it.

These thoughts on appearance are not intended to suggest a theatrical approach to preaching but to remind you that the preacher is a public figure appearing before an audience. How you look, how you act, how you speak does make a difference and does have an effect on your success.

You are "on stage." You are before an audience.

The following suggestions may seem trite and unnecessary to some, but may be of help to others:

- ◆ Wear clothing in colors and styles that are attractive and appropriate for the occasion. The venue and situation will dictate how you should dress. It is better to err on the conservative side. Don't be a clotheshorse, but there is little justification for entering the pulpit looking like a slob.
- ◆ Shoes should be clean and polished.
- ◆ Your hair is important to your overall appearance.
- ◆ It should be freshly shampooed, styled or cut neatly.
- ◆ Develop an attractive, proper platform demeanor.
- ◆ Men, avoid slouching down in the platform chair with your legs spread apart waiting for your time to speak.

- ◆ When you do get up to speak, remember the pulpit is for your Bible and notes, not for you to lean on.

What a privilege it is to stand before an audience and bring them the "Spoken Word," the Gospel of Jesus Christ.  
The house lights have dimmed.  
The curtains have parted.  
You are on stage.

## **REVIEW THOUGHTS FROM CHAPTER SEVEN**

- ◆ Take your sermon outline to the pulpit with you and follow it.
- ◆ Spend time developing your ability to communicate effectively through words.
- ◆ Sermon time: 25 to 30 minutes for those beginning to preach and 40 to 45 minutes as you become more experienced.
- ◆ Make your sermons interesting; use word pictures.
- ◆ Look and sound alive in the pulpit.
- ◆ Good grooming and personal appearance are important items to those appearing before an audience.
- ◆ Proper platform demeanor is important.

## **EPILOGUE**

Most of us have heard the adage: "What you see is what you get." Let me modify that to say: "What you preach is what you get."

Words are powerful.

Sermons are powerful vehicles of information and ideas that evoke strong emotions and corresponding actions.

It is an awesome thought that we are, to some degree, setting the course of people's lives and establishing thought patterns in their minds through our teaching and preaching. Understanding the validity of that thought compels us to address the significance of what we preach and to give prayerful attention to the choice of a scripture text and topic.

That choice of a text can have great consequences.

Preach Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection and people will be converted.

Preach faith and people will be encouraged to believe God.

Preach worship and they will worship.

Preach love and they will respond by loving one another.

Preach evangelism and they will seek the lost.

Preach hope and they will not despair and give up.

Preach fear and they will be anxious.

Preach condemnation and they will be oppressed.

Preach the dark side of life and they live in the shadows.

Preach spiritual victory and they will sing songs of deliverance with you.

Our preaching by necessity must span a wide range of subjects and truths. The Bible covers the full orb of human behavior and clearly provides solutions and answers to the human dilemma.

As faithful ministers of God's Word we must preach judgment as well as grace and redemption. Sin must be dealt with and salvation explained.

The manner in which we handle the various teachings of God's Word is of great importance.

You will be wise in your preaching if you make it a rule to not preach people into judgment without clearly showing them God's solution and love.

Be redemptive in your preaching. Balance out your sermon.

Never preach what you do not fully believe.

Don't put a burden on your people that you can not or would not be willing to bear yourself.

Avoid preaching that which you do not practice or live.

Let Jesus Christ be the center and overall theme of your preaching.

The Cross is our place of victory and the power of God to all who believe.

The risen Christ must be proclaimed.

The Apostle Paul told the Corinthian church that his ministry and preaching was not with man's wisdom, but in "demonstration of the Spirit and of power."

Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, writing of the importance of the call to preach said:

"The work of preaching is the highest and the greatest and the most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called."

To which we say: Amen and Amen.