

Requirements for Effective Preaching

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Introduction

Much can be learned about how to be more a more effective preacher. In fact, preachers should continue to grow the rest of their lives in their understanding of preaching and in their ability to communicate effectively.

There are many topics related to preaching that can be addressed in great detail. In this seminar, however, we will look at **four primary requirements for effective preaching**.

As we discuss this, remember one fact: your preaching will define your ministry more than anything else you do.

For preaching to be effective, it must first of all be:

I. Accurate

2 Timothy 2:15—We must “cut it straight.”

William Hogan: “Scripture is not a piece of play dough to be molded into whatever shape the preacher desires. The preacher is always the servant of the biblical text, not master of it.”

There are certain necessary activities related to studying the Bible that help us handle the Scriptures accurately. These activities summarize *exegesis*—the practice of and set of procedures. This means “getting out of Scripture what God meant for it to say.” The opposite of this is *eisogesis*—this is reading into Scripture what we want to say.

The exegetical method is hard work, but worth it.

A. Prayer

Pray for yourself; pray for understanding. Prayer is necessary throughout the process of sermon preparation.

B. Reading

Be systematically reading through the whole Bible—this gives you the “big picture.” Learn what the main theme of each book is and what topics are covered in each book. Read through the book you are preaching from. But also take the passage you will be preaching from and read through it as many times as possible during the week.

3. Observing

Begin making observations as you read. Observe such things as:

- Questions
- Explicit statements
- Repetition
- Verbs
- Connectors
- Comparisons/contrasts
- Changes in content
- Modifiers
- Major biblical words

It is crucial to identify the *theme* of the passage.

4. Investigating and Interpreting

This is classic exegesis—the *grammatical/historical method*. It involves dealing with issues of grammar—lexical studies; syntactical studies.

Know the principles of hermeneutics—the rules by which we do exegesis. There is only one proper interpretation, though there may be many applications.

General Principles

- The clarity of Scripture—the Bible can be understood.
- Accommodation of revelation—the Bible communicates using terms we can relate to.
- Progressive revelation—God did not choose to reveal all truth at one time. There is a gradual unfolding with continuity.
- Scripture interprets Scripture—one or more Scripture passages will help interpret the right meaning in another text. Cross-referencing is an aid to proper interpretation.
- Analogy of the faith—this principle says there is one unified, consistent, harmonious system of faith (belief) in the Bible. That is, to put it in negative terms, no point, when correctly understood, will contradict another.
- The “oneness” or “singleness” of the meaning of Scripture (in any one text)—this principle means that a biblical text has one basic proper meaning or interpretation, not two or three. There is one correct interpretation, but there may be several legitimate applications.
- Interpretation and application—the interpretation of a text reveals timeless principles which can then lead to many possible applications.
 - How does it apply to me? How has it impacted me?
 - How does it apply to my listeners?

- Historical appropriateness—what would the initial recipients, given the light God allowed them to possess at that point in time, have most naturally understood a statement to mean? Is the interpretation really sensitive to their progressive revelation?
- Checking principle—this principle simply means that we check whatever scholarly, special sources would stand the best chance of giving reliable information on a passage or point.
- Priority of the original languages—consult the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek to find first-hand what really is said as to word order, words, tenses of verbs, and other points of grammar or meaning.
- Necessity of literal interpretation—the method can be called the historical, grammatical, or historical-grammatical method.

Specific Principles

- Word study—it is important to know what a word meant in the day it was written. Meaning can change over time. Context is the best determiner.
- Grammar—there are issues related to parts of speech, tenses of verbs, syntax, etc.
 - Key words—verbs, repeated words, number, gender
 - Structure—connecting words
 - Cause and effect
 - Prepositions
 - Distinguish major markers and minor markers
- Context—we must consider the context of the entire Bible, the Old Testament or New Testament, the particular book of the Bible, and the immediate context. This is an extremely important hermeneutical principle. Example: Matthew 18:20; Philippians 4:13. *It is the highest form of arrogance to pull verses and phrases out of their context and to make them say what God did not originally intend for them to say.*
- Cross reference—there are verbal, conceptual, and parallel cross-references.
- Literary mold—does the passage occur in the context of straightforward history or in a context of frequent figures of speech, etc.?
- Cultural factors—there are direct cultural issues, as well as geographical and historical factors.

We are not interested in the approach that many Bible teachers take:

- “What do you think it means?”
- “Well, I think it means...”

What’s important is—what does it mean if neither you nor I ever existed? The meaning of the text is the author’s intended meaning.

But many resort to a form of *mysticism* in handling the Bible. Illustration: Believing God “spoke” to you through a certain passage, yet there’s nothing in the passage corresponding to what you think God said.

We don’t look for codes or hidden messages—we come to Scripture with our minds looking to understand it like any other book, being fair to the author.

5. Meditating

This is very important all through the process—after reading; after observing; after exegeting, and after forming the sermon. Again, the exegetical method is hard work.

Calvin: “It is blasphemous to turn the meaning of Scripture around without due care, as though it were some game we were playing.”

It takes *time*. It may take more *training*.

II. Clear

We have to deliver it. Haddon Robinson said: “The effectiveness of our preaching depends on two factors—what we say and how we say it.”

Exposition is the art of crafting the exegesis.

Nolan Howington said: “The exegete is like a diver bringing up pearls from the ocean bed; an expositor is like the jeweler who arrays them in an orderly fashion and in proper relation to each other.”

The point: there is *good* communication, and there is *bad* communication.

But God’s truth is so infinitely valuable that it demands clarity of understanding and presentation.

There are elements in a sermon that help the clarity (and their absence can certainly hinder clarity).

A. Identify the main theme of the passage.

Put in a concise statement—this is vital.

B. State the main theme as a timeless principle.

This also is vital—we stand in the gap between the biblical world and our world.

C. Create an outline that reflects the main divisions of the text.

This is “principlizing” the text.

- D. Work on clear transitions that will help the listeners move from one outline point to the next.

In other words, seek to maintain a logical flow of thought. You may need to write these out.

- E. Use an appropriate introduction that captures the attention of the audience.

- F. Use appropriate illustrations that clearly relate to the main points.

- G. Mention appropriate applications of the sermon’s main points.

Clarity depends on order, explanation, argumentation, illustration, and application. It’s easy to be confusing and unclear. It takes work to be clear. *There is no virtue in sloppiness and being vague.*

A primary consideration: The meaning and flow of thought must be clear in your own mind first. *Mist in the pulpit will result in fog in the pew.*

To accomplish this, you must allow time to meditate on what you are studying, as well as on the sermon you have constructed.

III. Passionate

You can be accurate and clear...but also dull. John MacArthur said: “A boring preacher is a contradiction in terms.”

The exposition of Scripture is the highest priority of the preacher. But preaching biblical truth without passion and conviction is a betrayal of its essence.

This is not talking about:

- Shouting and screaming; ranting and raving
- Pounding the pulpit
- Running across the platform or stage

But this IS referring to *pathos*—some emotion.

- Some excitement when appropriate
- Some voice inflections
- Some body language

Lloyd-Jones: “Preaching is logic on fire. A theology which does not take fire I maintain is a defective theology. Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire. A man who can speak dispassionately about truth has no right to enter the pulpit, and should never be allowed to enter one.”

People asked Wesley why great crowds came to hear him preach. He responded: “I’m on fire...and people come to watch me burn.”

What stimulates passion in preaching?

A. Being personally affected by the passage.

Personally “gripped” by the text—personalize it.

B. Seeing how the passage relates to the lives of the listeners.

You *want* to share it.

C. Having personal passion for Christ.

1. Psalm 18:1; 63:1–2
2. Paul—“For me to live is Christ.”

D. Realizing the great privilege it is to preach God’s Word

1. You must think of your work as a “get to” and not a “have to.”
2. Constantly express your thanks to God.

E. Being prepared

This produces confidence, which relates to passion.

F. Having a clear conscience

1. This refers to “keeping short accounts with God” concerning your own sin.
2. Confess, and seek forgiveness.

A related thought: preach with authority. There is inherent authority in the Word of God. So there is inherent authority in teaching it. Don’t be timid.

This is not referring to being abusive or ungracious. *But we speak for God—we are His ambassadors.* Don’t be afraid to use the second-person pronoun “you.”

- Preaching is *exhortational*.
- 2 Corinthians 5:11—Paul says “We persuade men.”
- Galatians 1:10

There is a real lack of courage among church leaders today. Humility and authority are not mutually exclusive. Pray for *genuine* passion—*painted fire doesn't burn*.

IV. Christ-Centered

Christ must be in every sermon.

This is NOT the same thing as saying that we can find Christ in every text. I'm not talking about violating hermeneutics. But remember: we are New Covenant preachers. Al Mohler said: "All Christian preaching should be unabashedly Christological."

What about preaching the Old Testament? Great—but don't be guilty of preaching a sermon that would be totally accepted in a Jewish Synagogue.

- Luke 24:44
- John 3:14; 12:32
- 1 Corinthians 1:1, 18, 23–25; 2:2, 15:1–8
- 2 Corinthians 4:5; 5:19
- Hebrews 1:2
- 1 Peter 1:1–3

The point: people need Christ for both salvation and sanctification.

We are not preaching to impress others with ourselves. James Denney said: "No man can give at once the impression that he himself is clever and that Jesus Christ is mighty to save."

Be "gospel-oriented" in your preaching (John 5:39–40; 15:26).

"Preaching that is Christ-centered is an act of grace, making clear God's initiative toward us in Christ. Preaching is one means by which the redeemed bear witness to the Son who saves."
(Mohler)

At the very least, point people to Christ in your conclusion.

Conclusion

You can have good content and poor preaching; and you can have good preaching with poor content. The Lord deserves good content and good preaching.

The result? People will grow. God will be pleased. You will be filled with joy in knowing you have fulfilled your calling.