

How to Move from the Text to the Sermon

By Bob Young

Two components of sermon and class preparation are exegesis and application. The development of the sermon (or class) depends on the exegetical work that one has done in the text. The sermon or class cannot be any better than the preparation. The exegetical work is essential and of much value in preparing a class, because in most cases the class will draw more heavily on the exegesis. That is, many classes have as a primary purpose to explain what the text says. Class teacher should beware of the need to suggest applications and not to spend all of the class time on explanation. Unfortunately, when one mentions “Bible study” too often our concept is limited to what the text says and includes too little of what the text means.

The primary focus of this booklet is on developing a sermon. Exegesis is the first step. The exegetical work is essential to understanding the message of the text. Without understand the message of the text, one is trying to preach what one does not understand. But after one completes the exegetical work, one must ask oneself, “How can I share the message of this text in a sermon?” This is an exegetical question, but it is also relates to the purpose of the sermon and the form or organization of the sermon. The focus in this booklet is on these two aspects of sermon development: deciding the purpose of the sermon and writing the sermon outline.

What is your purpose in preaching the sermon?

An effective preacher knows what he is trying to accomplish in a sermon, that is, the purpose of the sermon. By identifying a purpose, the preacher will be able to evaluate whether the sermon was successful or not. Many times in expository or textual sermons, the purpose of the sermon will be informed by the purpose of the original author. That is, the preacher will try to let the text function as it did originally. (This is not a hard and fast rule, and is not as popular as in times past.) If the preacher wants the text to function as it did for the original author, exegesis is essential. One must understand the context and content, what the text meant for the author and recipients.

If exegesis is the first step, the second step is application. To help you think about various possibilities as you determine the purpose of your sermon, I have provided a short list of common reasons or goals. You will likely notice that some of the purposes included in the list are similar to one another and overlap. This similarity has the advantage of giving several options that are related but distinct. Motivation and action are similar, but one may focus more in the will and the second in what one does.

- Motivate
- Actuate, move to some action
- Inspire
- Exhort, encourage
- Inform (teach)
- Explain
- Providing counseling for specific needs or problems, “how to....”

- Provide an experience
- Clarify
- Correct
- Convince

The preacher should ask which of these purposes best reflects the biblical text and the needs to be addressed. Thus purpose is informed by both exegesis and application.

Helps for analyzing and organizing the text

Once you have completed your exegetical work, you are able to understand how the text naturally divides itself. The natural textual divisions may or may not provide an inspiring outline. The application the preacher desires to make of the text informs the sermon outline. In this section I suggest some ways of analyzing the text and organizing the sermon. Most of these are listed and described in Stafford North's *Preaching: Man and Method*.

- In a narrative or historical text, one might find it helpful simply to tell the story and make applications. This can be done in smaller sections (narrative followed by application, narrative followed by application, etc.) but sometimes it is better to tell the entire story and then draw out the various applications for the contemporary hearers.
- Another approach can be described as analytical. This does not refer to the process used by the preacher to analyze structure, grammar, vocabulary, etc., but suggests that the sermon itself will help the audience analyze the text. Often an analytical sermon outline will ask the question "Why?" and then give answers based on the text. This illustration will help you understand this type of sermon, but consider also that the analytical approach is not limited to the "why" model. Another example: in Matthew 4 and also in Matthew 9, Jesus came teaching, preaching, and healing. Here are three points taken directly from the text. Using the key word "how" instead of "why," one can analyze the text to show examples of how Jesus did each of these things. In a study of the early chapters of Romans one can note who should be baptized, why, how, when, and the results. This would combine topical and textual. Analytical sermons often focus on a specific subject and how it is described in the text.
- Some texts present problems and provide solutions. The murmuring of Acts 6 is an example. There was a problem in the early church. How did they resolve it? One can mention several factors that were part of the solution.
- I like to preach biographies. One of the first sermons I developed during my college years was a sermon focused on Aquila and Priscilla. I traced their lives chronologically, showing how they were involved in the church and modeled Christianity, evangelism, and hospitality. Of course, the Bible presents many opportunities for preaching biographies, many times of relatively unknown personalities.
- It has been observed that every hearer ought to be able to find him or herself in the text. Narratives (and some other texts) give the opportunity to study and present the text according to the persons involved. A simple example is in Luke 19. Where are you in the story? Are you Zacchaeus, Jesus, the crowd? One could organize the sermon around these three points rather than chronologically preaching from the first verse to

the last verse of the text. A possible framework in Luke 19 would be, “What changed or did not change in the lives of the persons involved?”

- Another approach to preaching a text is to note chronology. Sometimes it is helpful to analyze something from the perspectives of the past, present, and future. Numerous texts have such references (past, present, future) within the passage. Two examples are in 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 and Titus 2:11-12.
- If the text can be analyzed according to the people involved, and according to the chronology, it can also be analyzed according to places or locations. What are the principal places where Abraham lived and what primary lesson did he learn in each of those places? Or one can note that Jesus existed in heaven before the Incarnation, he lived on earth, he returned to heaven, and he lives within us.
- Two kinds of sequences appear in the Bible. The first is a logical sequence where various items logically follow one another. A common form is “If #1 is true, then #2....If #2 is true, then #3....etc.” Some texts follow this pattern almost exactly. A second kind of sequence is called the “motivated sequence.” To preach this second kind of sermon, a motivated sequence, begins with a specific need in the audience. Typical points in the sermon are calling attention to the situation, describing the need, telling how the need can be satisfied, helping people “buy into” the solution by seeing how and why the new situation will be better, and urging appropriate actions to remedy the lack and meet the need.
- The Bible contains analogs, and describing a situation analogically can be very helpful in preaching. One advantage of the analog is that usually one can guard or hide the final point so that the hearers buy in before they see the application. Parables often function in a similar way. Be careful, however, because not all analogs are valid. How do we know that two situations (as in Galatians 4) are analogical? Because the Bible says so. For this reason, another way to describe this approach is to think of it as connecting two items with the first serving as illustration of the second, or the first as prophecy of the second, or the first as example of or in some way related to the second. Thus, Abraham says a lot about faith (Romans 4-5); Old Testament Israel illustrates many truths that are relevant to God’s New Testament people, etc.
- Another way to approach the text is to identify a certain point to be explained, exemplified, and applied. An example of how one can do this is in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Paul explains that the Scriptures provide wisdom; he gives examples of how the Scriptures can do this—teaching, reproving, correcting, and instructing; and shows the result when the Scriptures are thus applied.
- In addition, one should note that on the basis of the exegetical work, one can analyze the text for repeated words or phrases, constructions, parallel verbs, and other linguistic factors.

Four Types of Sermons

Many preachers, church leaders and members use certain words to describe sermons without understanding exactly what the words mean. Further, there is not total agreement among

scholars about how to categorize sermons. Nonetheless, I have found helpful a model that describes four types of sermons.

Textual. A textual sermon obviously focuses on the text; often using one of the organizational helps described above to analyze a small portion of text. A textual sermon is generally limited in scope. A textual sermon often treats only a few verses, usually less than a paragraph in the original context. An example is 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10. The Thessalonians previously served idols, now they serve the living God and are examples everywhere the news of their service goes, and they are waiting for the return of Jesus. This past-present-future model gives ample opportunity to illustrate the three points from the text of the book, but it seems the sermon is textual in its outline even though it may appear expository in the breadth of its examples. I call it a textual sermon because the two verses would not present a complete thought according to the intent of the original author.

Expository. Expository sermons seek to communicate the meaning of a larger section of text (but should not be confused with a verse by verse study). In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul says Christians have several things. What do we have (a ministry, a treasure, God's power, faith, an eternal view)? What is the importance of these for the Christian today? This sermon is not a verse by verse study. In fact one will find examples of the points scattered throughout the chapter, so each point could potentially reprise the entire chapter. The expository sermon finds its organizing question in an analysis of the extended text and is usually seeking to accomplish a purpose parallel to or related to the purpose of the original author.

Expository (alternate). Another kind of expository sermon uses an extended text but does not necessarily reflect the intention of the original author. In my previous booklet that describes the exegetical process, I gave the example of a sermon on Acts 2 (or Acts 2-5) that describes the early church. It does not seem that Luke's primary purpose in writing to Theophilus was to describe the church. Thus, the text can be applied with value to contemporary needs and for purposes that are not always the same as those of the original author.

Topical. A topical sermon usually begins with a subject rather than a text. Such sermons often jump from passage to passage in an effort to present the Bible teachings about the subject. Alternatively, it is possible to begin in a text; to note that much is said in that text about one certain topic; and to develop a topical sermon based on that text, as in the sample sermon on baptism that could be drawn mostly from Romans 6. (In such cases, other texts and verses could serve as illustrations rather than providing major sermon points). Examples of topical sermons include the three occurrences of the word Christian in the New Testament, or the three occurrences of the phrase "obey the gospel" in the New Testament. A common approach is that each text provides a point in the sermon. But it would also be possible to begin with a primary point, Why is it important to obey the gospel, and to use the three texts to show three reasons it is important (analytical).

Conclusion

I hope that this brief summary of some ideas to help you move from the text to the sermon is helpful. After doing your own exegetical work to study and understand the text, it is important to develop a sermon that can meet the needs of the hearers. It is important that the sermon reflect the text accurately. These are two components of the process—exegesis and application.

These two components are reflected in the purpose and organization of the sermon. These thoughts about purpose, organization, and sermon type are designed to provide starting points to the person who does not have experience in these things, and does not have access to the standard preaching books.

May your preaching and teaching improve, always reflecting the whole counsel of God!