

Methods of Sermon Presentation

Let me quickly review from the last lesson. Some basic functions of transitions are to review and preview. A dialogical transition is a question asked out loud in the body of the sermon. The key wording beaoning behind a logical connection transition is “not only, but also.” A billboard is the use of key words to preview. These could be the key words of following subpoints or main points.

In this lesson we want to look at the options a preacher has in preparing the materials necessary to preach a sermon. We talked about introductions, conclusions, and propositions. There are many things that we have talked about, but what do you actually take into the pulpit, and how do you present it? We will get into delivery aspects in a little bit, but first let us talk about what preachers take with them into the pulpit and how they typically organize it.

As you think of types of presentation, Broadus says there are three basic ways that preachers present messages. That will affect how we prepare what we take with us into the pulpit. The three major presentations can be reading, reciting, or extemporizing. Those are the basic options. I can simply read a message, memorize it and recite it, or do some form of extemporizing. I have something in my brain, but I still spontaneously speak as I go. In this generation, extemporizing is most accepted. Reading to people will not work in this generation. If you can naturally recite, that will work. But if it sounds like you are reading off of a teleprompter even while you recite, people will not listen. It will sound so canned. This is not the generation that will listen to that kind of thing. Typically there is some form of extemporizing that we will use.

Lewis Paul Layman gives a more exhaustive list of how what we present and what we prepare affects things. He talks about it in terms of different types of prepared messages. First are manuscript sermons, which might be read. The most famous preacher in history for reading sermons is Jonathan Edwards. Do not forget he stopped reading after a while. Even in his generation, it did not keep working. He read, but then he stopped doing it because he recognized it with his own people. Manuscript sermons can be read or memorized. There are people who have a photographic memory. Dr. Benton at Kirk of the Hills has that ability. If you listen to the message in the first service and the second service, it is basically word for word the same, and he does not read it. There are people with exceptional abilities, but most of us are not able to memorize. That means a third use of manuscript sermons is that they might be converted to outlines and extemporized in the pulpit. The manuscript is used to get you very ready, and then you convert it to an outline and extemporize in the pulpit off of the outline. That is what we will do for two semesters. We will prepare manuscripts, convert them to outlines, and preach from the outline. The manuscript ensures preparation, and hopefully the outline ensures eye contact and spontaneity.

Another type of prepared message is the outline sermon. There are two forms of outline sermons, the first of which is extended outlines. This is what most preachers I know use. They preach from extended outlines of two to four pages of outline material that they take into the pulpit. The second is a bare-bones outline. That is where a lot has been practiced so the preacher does not even want the outline itself to rob him of eye contact. He creates something just to prompt his memory and uses that. My goal in using a bare-bones outline is that if I forget, it is my safety blanket. I just want something to prompt my thinking, but I do not want to look at this a lot. I have something that gets me going.

A bare-bones outline is what I typically take into the pulpit. I do not often look at it, but I have that security if I need it. It is something that has consistent visual markers. I usually use Roman numerals for major main points. I use Arabic numerals for subpoints. I almost always circle an illustration. I almost

always use this little conclusion for application. I do not know why I do that. I did it years ago, and I still do it. It has become something that is a consistent visual marker for me, so when my eye looks on the page, I automatically know what I am looking at. The illustration may not always come at the same point. I may move it before or after the subpoints. But I use a circle, because it is a habit that has developed over the years. I use circles to indicate it is an illustration to distinguish it from my eye picking up main points.

If you have extended outlines or bare-bones outlines, that does not mean that they have never existed in manuscript form. This is what you take into the pulpit, but you may very well have had a manuscript outline that you converted to an extended outline or a bare-bones outline. A truly extemporized sermon is one that was never in manuscript form. I think most preachers prepare extended outlines and practice the extended outline so that the pulpit is not the first place that you ever verbalize what the extended outline says. Most preachers I know prepare an extended outline and at least practice portions of it before standing in the pulpit. Many preachers I know do the extended outline, practice it, and then convert to the bare-bones outline. That is what they take into the pulpit. You may never want to do what I do, but this is what I find I have to do. My own practice is to go from exegetical outline to extensive homiletical outline to full manuscript to bare-bones outline. I use the extended outline to prepare a manuscript, but I do not want to take a manuscript into the pulpit (with rare exceptions), and then I preach from a bare-bones outline. I will tell you more about why I do some of those things in just a bit.

Let us talk about the other alternative of sermon preparation. Beyond the outline sermons, there are what Lewis Paul Layman calls unwritten sermons. We might call these extemporized sermons. The first type of extemporized sermon is the mental outline. You may never put pencil to paper, but you still put an outline in your brain. You work it out. These are the great sermons I think about when I jog! Then I forget by the time I get back home. These mental outline sermons are ones that you have thought through. The other kind of extemporaneous sermon is called “true impromptu.” It is spur of the moment, and you just go on with it. It might follow the flow of the text, but it has the spontaneity of the moment.

Let me give a few modern variations from these. One is called putting the outline in the manuscript. The sermon we have been going over throughout this class has a lot of Roman numerals and bold face words. It makes the outline jump out of the manuscript. The outline is keyed into the message, and there are a lot of ways that people do that. You can do it with bold facing, different fonts, using margin differences, or even using a highlight to note key points. That is a form of writing the manuscript but making the outline visible within the manuscript. Another thing that is a product of the media age in which we live now is a number of preachers who use broadcast manuscripts. They put the manuscript on only two-thirds of the page, typically on the right-hand side. The left hand third of the page is for the outline. There may be key terms there. Instead of reading the illustration, I might just write “puppy dog” and write key terms in the left-hand margin.

Those of you who have done broadcast work know that that is a little bit reversed. Typically in a broadcast situation, you would put text on the left-hand side, and the camera and audio cues are on the right. That is because you read a manuscript and the cues are on the right for the director, but we flip it. The first thing I want my eye to see is my notes to myself, my outline. On the left-hand margin I put the outline features, and the right hand is the manuscript. People at Asbury Seminary have done a lot of experimenting with those broadcast styles. I did that for a few years and found it quite effective when I was in pastoral ministry particularly. I used the left-hand margin for the outline and did not become too dependent on the manuscript but had it if I wanted it. It is an alternative for you.

Let us go over strengths and weaknesses of different preparation methods. A strength of preaching with

the impromptu method is that it is not mechanical. It does not sound at all artificial. It can also be a great time saver. Sometimes you need a time saver. Sometimes it is time to preach, and you were not given a warning. Something needs to be said. These are times of crisis and tragedy where you simply need to speak. Those may cause impromptu messages. A weakness of this kind of message is that it is disorganized and not put together well. It might take a long time to terminate the message, or it might terminate too fast. It may not have a very clear direction, and it could have a lot of mistakes in it. Obviously it does not have much study behind it. The strength is that it is very natural and saves time you need in that moment. But its weaknesses are its unpreparedness, which is inherently unbiblical. "Study to show yourself a workman approved unto God who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

Preparation is needed to do what the Bible requires. So just being unprepared by habit rather than necessity is the problem. Everyone understands being unprepared by necessity. I struggle with this, though it sounds so easy here in class. My own background and tradition was primitive Baptist training. The sense was that it was not only artificial but also inhibiting of the work of the Holy Spirit to prepare. I was really helped by a man who was a defrocked Methodist pastor. He and his wife were in my church years after the troubles in their lives. I mentioned to him at one point that my background and training was in my father's church. Those men would show up and two or three of them would sit at the front and say, "Who wants to speak this morning?" A little conversation would go back and forth until someone decided to speak. He would stand and speak, and it was viewed as improper to have prepared. The Methodist minister listened to me say that and asked me, "What keeps the Holy Spirit from working in your study?" I thought that was a great question. Nothing keeps the Holy Spirit from working in your study. The Holy Spirit works all places and at all times. He uses instruments that are well honed, but it seems that there is not anything unbiblical about preparing ahead of time. Some say it imposes man's ideas on the preaching, and that is true if you have not prayed in your study. But if you prayed with your study of the text, there is nothing that should have prohibited the Holy Spirit from doing His work there as well.

There are also strengths and weaknesses of preaching extemporaneously from outlines. The advantages are that if you have an outline, you have had some preparation. By an outline only it is a shortcut in a busy schedule. An outline is quicker to prepare than a full manuscript. Outlines also help you keep eye contact and natural expression. Ordinarily it allows more freedom and power of delivery. The disadvantage of preaching extemporaneously from outlines is the temptation to be unprepared. There is a temptation to do too little work. There is also the possibility of imprecision and mistakes.

I have mentioned before how much I respect John Broadus, the father of expository preaching. One of the reasons I do is because of how wise he is. In his era, which was 150 years ago, you think about the insistence on well-prepared and scholarly sermons of those days. He talked about the advantages and disadvantages of extemporaneously preaching from outlines, "The style of an extemporaneous sermon is apt to be less condensed, less finished than if it were written out or recited. But this is not necessarily a fault. The style may be better adapted to speaking as opposed to writing." Extemporaneous preaching may sound more like you sound when you talk and therefore not artificial. He said this,

A similar and more serious disadvantage of extemporaneous sermons is the danger of making blunders in statement. In the ardor of the moment, the speaker is likely to say some things that are irrelevant, ill considered, improper, and sometimes, alas, even untrue. Some men more than others run this risk, but all are more or less liable. Some hints may be given as safeguards: make thorough preparation and thus diminish the danger, keep a cool head no matter how warm the heart. If the slip is serious, correct it on the spot and go on. If very serious but not observed at the

time, correct it on a later occasion. But for the most part, leave the mistakes along. If you have real merits and enjoy the confidence of your congregation, it will be one of your most blessed privileges to live down many blunders.

We have probably all teased our pastor at some point for what he said. When he blushed, smiled, and said, “Thank you,” you actually loved him more because he could take it well. Obviously if it is a real mistake, correct it. One of my favorite examples of this was Dan Doriani, who is one of the best preachers and teachers I know. When he was a new professor, he preached his inaugural sermon here in the chapel. He preached away and said, “And Jesus Christ is so great. He is the greatest of the created beings.” Then he said, “No He is not; that is a heresy! And I’ll be the first to deny it!” He made a terrible blunder, but it did not bother him. The mark of great speakers is not that they fail to make mistakes. It is that they are poised when they make mistakes. Everyone makes mistakes. If you can take it, live it down, and move on, that is great. Actually, people will be very comfortable with you. The advantages of preaching from written manuscripts are great precision and assured preparation. The disadvantages are lack of eye contact and the temptation to read.

We will use the method of Robert Murray McShane. Just recently we had a man from his church here. David Robertson was here from Saint Peters Free Church. That was the famous church of Robert Murray McShane, the revivalist who died young. McShane prepared a manuscript, converted it to an outline, and preached from the outline. He felt that it greatly aided the ardor and passion of his speaking but still came from great preparation. After writing out a manuscript, you could put your outline in a key word form in the margin. You could also put your outline in the manuscript, using highlights, underlining, or margin variation. Or you could put the outline on another piece of paper. That is what I do, using consistent eye catchers. Over time, develop a consistent eye catcher.

Keep main points from starting at the bottom of pages. You have a lot of paper with you. If you do not start a main point two-thirds down on the page, you will keep from confusing your eye. Experienced preachers typically start all main points at the top of the next page. Even if they have a lot of white space at the bottom, they go onto the next page. They do not try to look down while they flip pages. They move pages while they talk. They look at the congregation, so they want their eyes to be able to look down and know exactly where the next point is. If they start the main point at the top of pages, they will automatically be oriented to the next main point every time they do a transition. Start main points at the top of pages, and find some visual point like circling to indicate where you are.

If you move pages, slide them. If you pick up the pages, everyone will look at them. If you try to organize them in a nice stack, it will also be distracting. Watch those who are very concerned about sticking with people and do not want them looking at their notes. They learn to just move them across. They have a discard stack and a use stack. I use one stack, and when I am done with it I look at you, but I move the page to the discard stack. I may pick up my Bible, slide this under, and move it over. I do not want to put something in people’s eye line and vision. It creates distraction for people.

As we follow these various methods, we want to make sure that we have enough in front of ourselves that we can preach well. At the same time, we want to have a lot of eye contact with people.

Let us talk about how to preach from memory so that you keep a lot of eye contact. My best hint here is to use key words. If your main points are around “father, faith, and tomorrow,” even though the main point statement is much longer, having key words in order really helps you. Use key words that are parallel. Use illustrations to key your thought. The illustration is automatically the summary of the explanation and the preparation for the application. Those of you who are visually oriented, if you

remember the series of illustrations, the whole sermon will appear in front of you. It reminds you of what the explanation was about and prepares you for the application.

Finally, I would encourage you to learn the principles of imprinting. You may never want to do this, but it is something I do. If I prepare a 30-minute message, I will try to go through it entirely out loud at least twice the day before. I believe it is not just in my brain: I want to hear how the words sound. The last thing I do before I go to sleep is read it even while I am in bed. I want the last thing that goes in my brain to be that message. I believe in imprinting. The first thing I do when I wake up in the morning is I read through it again. I want to imprint that on my brain so that when I finally speak, I do not wonder where I am going. My greatest concern now is to get the message into you, not to get it out of me. I want to get it into you, because it is planted in my brain. But that is a lot of work. If I say a 30-minute message twice out loud, once before I go to bed, and once when I get up, that is two hours of practice right there.

That may sound awful, but I remember Ozzie Smith, multi-time golden glover and perhaps the best shortstop in baseball, who showed up at the ball park for a 7:30 game at 3:30. He took grounders for at least an hour and a half. He was the best shortstop of all time, and he practiced. Do not let anyone embarrass you about practicing. You want to get yourself ready so that you are finally free. You can over prepare, but you want to get so prepared that you are very free to say what God has given you to do.