

# What to Say and How to Say It: Sermon Styles and Elements

## FOCUS

When I first began to preach, I had not taken any courses on homiletics. I had always thought that I would be a teacher and never a preacher. So when that first serious request came to preach a series of two sermons, I made an emergency visit to my pastor. My request was simple. How do you put together a sermon? What kind of structure do you use? He smiled and I thought that I was in for a long and involved discussion on the fine points of homiletics. My pen and paper were prepared to take notes. Instead, this is what he told me. “The formula isn’t very complicated actually. It is more like a rhythm than a framework. For I have found that in a sermon, you teach a little while and then you give the congregation a carrot, like a story to keep them with you. Then you teach them a little more and follow with another carrot.” I left his office with that nugget as my entire preparation for preaching.

These next two lessons are designed to give you a handle on several different styles of sermons and then on key steps in composing a sermon.

## EXPLORE

### SERMON STYLES

Contrary to the view of most persons in the pew on any given Sunday morning, there are many ways to communicate God’s word from the pulpit. Following is a summary of three sermon styles all designed to communicate the message but each unique in its own way. Narrative, expository, and topical sermons are different vehicles designed to carry a different load. For example, you do not use a dump truck to take children to school. In the same way, the vehicle or sermon style must be appropriate to the message you are carrying.

#### *Narrative*

Narrative is one of the most recent sermon styles to be identified. Most of us grew up with exegetical or expository preaching. Then during times of stress or social upheaval both inside and outside the church, we were exposed to more doctrinal/topical sermons. But narrative sermons have always been an important

part of the African-American sermon experience. Now the narrative sermon has seen a recent resurgence of popularity among many other traditions as well.

This is not to say that the narrative sermon is a recent innovation. The biblical experience has often come to us in the form of a story. Story form is the way that God's history was capsulated and retained. It was a means of reminding Israel who they were, whose they were and their mission in life. For example, when the Israelites would come to the sanctuary, they were instructed to repeat this story as a response before the Lord: *"A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil and oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand."* (Deut. 26:5-8)

Narrative preaching is embedded in Jesus' own model of storytelling. When Jesus sought to explain the character or nature of God, he told his listeners the story about the shepherd who goes after the one lost sheep; about the woman who would not rest until she had found her lost coin; about the father who desperately wants both of his sons to come home. (Luke 15:1-32)

There are a number of different types of narrative preaching. The preacher might put him/herself in the shoes of a biblical character and tell the story as that character would. Or one might retell one of the stories recorded in either the Old or New Testaments, allowing the Biblical story itself to give the sermon its shape, movement or content. One might tell a personal story, not make-believe, but a story that took place as an actual event-in-time.

Read ARTICLE 5 page 98 "Hard Times: An Interview with Job," as an example of narrative preaching.

The strength of the narrative form is in the common journey undertaken by the preacher and the congregation. It is a journey common to all of our daily experiences and makes it easier for us to identify. And it is less coercive. In narrative preaching, there are few "you should" or "you ought to" phrases. Ethical implications gleaned from the stories are equally applicable to all on the journey. Therefore, narrative preaching has been claimed to be the most effective way for transforming lives.

### ***Exegetical/Expository***

The exegetical sermon is the one with which we are most familiar due to the abundance of early 20th century preachers of this genre. A. W. Tozer and C. H. Spurgeon would be two who would quickly come to mind as excellent examples of exegetical preachers.

This sermon style also follows the pattern that we learned in school for making speeches. First, you state the central theme you are going to address. This is generally a statement or conviction which you will prove to be true for your listeners. The statement could be: "God cares for our every need". Then using Psalm 23, the body is composed of usually three points of evidence supporting your basic statement. The three points could be: 1) God supplies physical needs v.1-3; 2) God supplies our emotional needs, v. 4-5; and 3) God supplies

our spiritual needs, v. 6. And then the conclusion restates the premise and the three points in brief, proving the basic premise true.

Eugene Lowry describes it like this: “This presentation was deductive in form, with the conclusion announced in the introduction, divided and particularized into a three-point body and then reiterated in the pulpit. In the pulpit you had one extra chance: if in doubt, you could always close in prayer and hence summarize it again.” (Eugene L. Lowry, “The Narrative Quality of Experience as a Bridge to Preaching”, *Journeys Toward Narrative Preaching*, p. 68).

An example of an exegetical or expository sermon can be found in ARTICLE 6 page 100, “Born of the Spirit.”

### ***Topical/Doctrinal***

Topical/doctrinal sermons are quite similar to exegetical preaching in style and structure. However, the basis for the sermon stems not from a specific biblical text but from a subject or issue upon which a variety of texts are brought to bear. This type of sermon comes closest to a teaching ministry. But that is not to state that it is second rate. Remember, Jesus was most often called “Rabbi” or “Teacher” by his listeners. And Paul clearly describes his own calling as being within this framework. He announced that his mission was “*to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things*” (Eph. 3:8,9). The doctrinal sermon takes the main truths of faith and outlines the basis for those truths from scripture. Only slightly different is the topical sermon that begins with a topic and applies scripture’s truths to that issue.

An example of a topical/doctrinal sermon can be found in ARTICLE 7 page 104, “God’s Homecoming: On Homelessness.”

1. ARTICLE 8 page 106 is a sermon by David Ewert called “The Gospel of the Resurrection.” (David Ewert, *Proclaim Salvation*, Herald Press, p.104-117). Using this sermon, complete the Sermon Outline Form which you will find at the end of Lesson Three.



## **CONNECT**

BASIC SERMON ELEMENTS: INTRODUCTION, BODY, CONCLUSION

### ***Introduction***

With the possible exception of the purely narrative sermon, few sermons can be considered successful without a clearly defined introduction, body and conclusion. To measure success in a sermon, the main theme must be communicated and received by the congregation. The congregation should walk away from the morning service and be able to say in one sentence your theme for that sermon. Therefore, a clear workable framework for communicating your nugget of truth is essential.

This begins with an introduction. It is in the introduction that the main theme is stated clearly and succinctly. This sets the theme and direction for the entire sermon. And every point added after this must contribute to, substantiate or relate to the main theme. If the congregation is not able to find the main theme in the introduction, it is highly unlikely that they will be able to articulate it at the end of the sermon.

Secondly, the introduction needs to grab the listener's interest and lead it to the topic at hand. This does not mean that in the introduction you announce the sermon title and the three main points. Instead you arrest the listener's interest by engaging them in a story or a topic that is of vital interest to their lives. This is essential because the earlier in the sermon that you can involve the listener's interest, the better chance you have of keeping them with you.



Jesus often engaged his listeners with a story. And here the parables stand out as classic examples. Think of the parable of the sower and the seed in Luke 8:4-15. For many of Jesus' followers sowing seeds to grow their own food in a small garden or a large field was part of their daily experience. It was a requirement of their lives that took considerable energy because the ground was rocky and poor. Middle Eastern soil seemed to grow weeds better than cultivated plants and rain was a constant concern. So Jesus snagged their interest right away with a story that met an immediate need. But it was not simply a joke or a story whose sole purpose was to warm up the crowd.

The story of the sower was right on target for what Jesus wanted to say to those listening. Therefore use a story that has immediate application to the topic at hand. The introduction in the parables of the sower lasts from vv. 4-8.

Another possibility is to speak of a common experience in the community such as a death, a fire or a serious illness in order to lead into the main theme. This is not reporting the news, this is speaking of God's truth and care in the midst of these experiences. And it is substantiating God's care as shown in the biblical account for that day.

Therefore the introduction must state the main theme and show the direction or purpose of the sermon. And without fail, the introduction must grab the listener's interest.

However be cautious that your introduction does not become too long! It is easy to become so involved with setting up the right environment for your sermon that you spend too much time introducing the topic and not enough time preaching the body. Several paragraphs or a story and a paragraph should be sufficient.

### ***Body***

The body is the greatest bulk of the sermon. This is the place where you lay out the teaching that you have prepared. This is where you invite your listeners to come with you as you recreate your experience and your learning from working with this scripture text. But how do you organize it?

Often the biblical text informs the structure. The body of Jesus' teaching in the parable of the sower which we are using as illustration lasts from v. 11-15. Here Jesus uses the structure of the story as his framework, eg. on the path, on the rocks, among thorns, and on good soil. These are his main points and he explains what each one means. Therefore the body of this sermon has four main points informed by the biblical text.

Sometimes the body of a sermon is organized on a recurrent theme. For example, in Psalm 13, the psalmist asks four times, "How long?" So a sermon could be organized around the repetition of this question. In a topical sermon addressing a specific situation such as homelessness, the body could be organized around the possible biblical responses to the homeless. And in a narrative sermon where the story is the sermon, it is the structure of the story that moves the sermon along and gives it shape.

The body of the sermon can contain a variety of pitfalls however. It is quite easy in this part of the sermon to relax and get lazy when it comes to organization. You well know that it is much easier to ramble on or to repeat the point over again only in slightly different words than it is to discipline yourself to organize the material. Be sure to throw out anything that may be of interest to you but does not contribute to the central theme.

Organization takes time. It is not possible to start a sermon on a Saturday evening, have time to live with your thoughts and come out with a well-organized sermon on Sunday morning. My own preference is to put down a rough draft of a sermon early in the week and then come back to it nearer to the time of delivery and organize it. If you cannot organize your sermon material well, you can be sure that your listeners will not be able to do it for you in their own minds and the message will be lost.

### ***Conclusion***

Over the years, more than one person in the pew has been surprised when the preacher has simply quit speaking and sat down. Somewhere along the way the listeners missed the change of pace, tone or summary which indicated a conclusion. And the end of the sermon seemed precipitous and almost jarring. When preparing a sermon, do not forget the conclusion. You may feel as if you have said everything that you want to say and are ready to sit down. But the listener needs to have the main theme reiterated. This is like coming back to home plate after you have touched all the bases. Even though you made it to third base with your three point sermon, you don't just head straight for the dugout! You need to reaffirm where the home plate or the main theme is again.

The conclusion also may be the final place where the problem that you have set up in the introduction is resolved. The psalmist in Psalm 13:1 asked, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" and set up the problem. The answer comes in the conclusion in v.6. "I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me." And it is in the conclusion of the narrative story where the happy ending occurs.

No story is complete with an introduction and complication (body). It also needs a resolution to feel finished. So does a sermon.

But just because you reaffirm the central theme and summarize the main

points in the conclusion does not mean that it should be boring. Completing this agenda in an engaging way is equally important. Perhaps you can find a quotation that summarizes your theme, or conclude by reading again the biblical text to accomplish this task. Perhaps you have found an illustration that perfectly describes the journey you have taken during the sermon. Work diligently to keep your listeners with you through to the final word.

However, be aware that you can indicate to your listeners you are concluding your sermon through a variety of means. For example, change the pace of your presentation in the conclusion. Try slowing your delivery near the end, making every word worth listening to. Or you may change the volume of your voice. If you have preached at one volume level throughout the sermon or have become progressively louder as you reached the high point of your message, try speaking very quietly near the end. You may also want to try lowering the register of your speaking voice in the conclusion, especially if you tend to let it get higher and higher as you reach the climax of your sermon. Some traditions have an altar call which for them is an important way to conclude a sermon. Given the creative ways to bring about a sermon ending, it is best to avoid the phrase “in conclusion....!”



Obtain a photocopy of one of your sermons for you to write on. You may want to record some responses on a separate piece of paper. Both the copy of your sermon and the paper with additional responses are to be handed in to your instructor.

2. Introduction – In the margin, identify the introduction.
  - a. How long is the introduction? Too long, too short or just right? Does the introduction take up more space in the total sermon than it should?
  - b. What in this introduction captures the listener’s attention? Underline the central theme as stated in the introduction and identify it in the margin.
  - c. As you think back over your presentation of this sermon, did the introduction fulfill its purpose of stating the theme, arresting the listener’s interest and setting the direction for the body?
3. Body – In a similar style, identify in the margin of your sermon the body of your message.
  - a. How was the body organized? What provided the framework for the message?
  - b. Underline the main points that moved the body along and number them in the margin. Were these major points clearly communicated to the congregation or did they have to deduce the points for themselves?
  - c. Can you tell the difference between the main points and the sub points?
4. Conclusion – Again identify in the margin the conclusion of your sermon.
  - a. How did the congregation know that this was the conclusion?
  - b. How was the main theme, which was presented in the introduction reaffirmed or resolved in your conclusion?
  - c. Underline the main theme repeated or resolved in the conclusion. Note this in the margin.

5. Now complete the Sermon Outline Form found at the end of Lesson Three for your sermon.



## **APPLY**

### SERMON DYNAMICS

It is easy for any one of us to get into a preaching rut and use the one style that is the most comfortable or the one from which we have received the best feedback. There is nothing wrong with being aware of our strengths but at the same time, when we limit our sermon styles we cut ourselves off from growing. When we over utilize one style, we tend to elicit only one kind of sermon dynamic. For example if you want to be confrontational in a prophetic mode you will likely not use a narrative style. Prophets were confrontational because they dared say, “You should do this or you will...” If this is your purpose then a topical or exegetical sermon style would work best. On the other hand, if you wanted to teach about the doctrine of baptism then a topical sermon style would suit that agenda. If you wanted to warn the congregation or nurture or inspire, then that task can be accomplished subtly with a narrative sermon. So begin by being aware of your own purpose when it comes to choosing a sermon style which best suits your task.

You may also want to be conscious of the intersection of your personal identity and your preference in preaching styles. Persons who tend to be linear thinkers seem to prefer exegetical or expository sermons. On the other hand, persons who understand the world through their intuition and feelings often prefer narrative. How does your personality influence the kind of sermon you prefer to preach?

6. Outline a series of 5 sermons. Answer three questions for each sermon:
- What scripture text do you plan to use?
  - What will be the main point for the sermon?
  - What style of sermon would best suit this message?
7. Have you used a variety of sermon styles to meet the range of congregational listening styles? Which sermon style provides the greatest area of growth for you as a preacher?





## Readings

### ARTICLE FIVE

Michael E. Williams, "Hard Times: An Interview with Job," *Journeys Toward Narrative Preaching*, Wayne Bradley Robinson, ed. Pilgrim Press, 1990, pp. 125-129

### ARTICLE SIX

David Ewert, "Born of the Spirit," *Proclaim Salvation*, Herald Press, 1992, pp. 145-155

### ARTICLE SEVEN

Barbara Lundblad "God's Homecoming: On Homelessness" *The Book of Women's Sermons*, Penguin Putnam Inc. pp 174-178

### ARTICLE EIGHT

David Ewert, "The Gospel of Resurrection." *Proclaim Salvation*, Herald Press, 1992, pp. 04-117