

Preaching Clinic for Elders
First Reformed Presbyterian Church (PCA)
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Session #4a – Orality and Sermon Outlines

1. Here are some general points regarding *oral* presentation.

a. Oral presentations are typically episodic in nature. That is, they are blocks of oral content, episodes, connected with one another. "What made a good epic poet was, among other things of course, first, tacit acceptance of the fact that episodic structure was the only way and the totally natural way of imaging and handling lengthy narrative, and, second, possession of supreme skill in managing flashbacks and other episodic techniques. Starting in 'the middle of things' is not a consciously contrived ploy but the original, natural, inevitable way to proceed for an oral poet approaching a lengthy (very short accounts are perhaps another thing). If we take the climactic linear plot as the paradigm of plot, the epic has no plot. Strict plot for lengthy narrative comes with writing" (Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 141).

b. "Oral narrative is not greatly concerned with exact sequential parallelism between the sequence in the narrative and the sequence in extra-narrative referents.... A narrator in an oral culture, as has been seen, normally and naturally operated in episodic patterning.... We must not forget that episodic structure was the natural way to talk out a lengthy story line if only because experience of real life is more like a string of episodes...." (Ong, 144-145).

c. Compare the general structure of Scripture.

- (1) Parts of the Bible were originally written in order that they might be read to God's people while other parts are the record of the messages spoken by Christ and the prophets.
- (2) "[A] few general observations can be made about units in the Hebrew Bible. With regard to length, the typical major literary unit in the Hebrew Bible is about fifteen to twenty pages of Hebrew text in BHS—the length of Genesis 1-11, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Isaiah 1-12, and Amos—and would take around half an hour to read to an audience. Secondary units are typically about the size of an average chapter in our modern Bibles—about one or two pages of Hebrew text—and would take an average of five minutes to read" (David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*, 25).

2. We should apply this characteristic of orality to the preparation of the sermon, the material we preach. Preaching is preeminently an oral activity. See David Buttrick, *Homiletic, Moves and Structure*, 24-27. Buttrick adds, page 35, "Thus, public speaking involves the designing of language in modules of meaning for group consciousness."

3. See Shedd, 137-138.

3. Writing an article or paper differs from writing a sermon. You put together a sermon for listening rather than reading. You must consider how people listen. Movement(s) in

sermons arrest attention and recapture attention. In addition, realize a sermon outline is not a study guide. *Sermon outlines are homiletical, preaching guides.*

3. Consider a traditional two-point outline.

Introduction

A. _____

1. _____

2. _____

B. _____

1. _____

2. _____

Conclusion

People do not necessarily hear the organization of the outline unless they are astute. You may take time to explain your outline, "I have two main points. Under point one I have two things I want you to get." What does this accomplish? People understand your outline. Do they get your content?

See Lawson on *The Expository Genius of John Calvin*, 96.

People do hear and sense the movement in the sermon the outline produces.

Introduction

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

See Craig Larson, "The Power of Sequence," *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, 358-360.

Sermons, no matter how intricately arranged, involve sequential talking, a series of language modules put together by some sort of logic. Just as a chain of sentences in a conversation may assemble to make meaning, so in preaching, moves (modules of language) form in consciousness to pattern an understanding. Before we can consider matters of arrangement, strategies of sermon design, and so forth, we must see what sermons are made of—namely a series of rhetorical units or moves. So we must study moves to see how they are shaped out of words and sentences and how, in turn, they form in the odd shared consciousness we call a “congregation.”

Any human speaking involves sequence, even impromptu discussion between close friends. If we imagine two women, near neighbors, talking together over coffee at a kitchen table, we can conceive of their conversation. For example, they may begin by talking of their children for a few minutes, which could lead to a discussion of the school their children attend. The conversation might then broaden to view the problems of American public education, and then more difficult problems of taxation for public education. They might then turn to complain of the withholding tax taken from their own paychecks, which could prompt discussion of sexist inequalities in the pay scale for women workers. Though the entire conversation might take an hour, we can break up the movement of their talk into a sequence of moves: first they spoke of children, then of local schools, then of public education, then of taxation, and finally of prejudicial patterns in the employment of women. The separate moves trundled along, joined by associational logic to form their conversational journey. Some matters may have been discussed for nearly fifteen minutes, while other subject matters consumed relatively little time. So all human speaking involves sequence; talk of A, then B, then C, then D, and so forth. Moreover, shifts in speaking will happen by many different kinds of logic. When the two friends, talking over coffee, shifted subject matters—from a local school to public education, or from general taxation to their own personal paychecks—they did so by rather familiar forms of logic, for example, from lesser to greater, from general to particular. All human conversation, unless it is nothing more than a brief exchange of small talk, has structured sequence; it will happen in a series of moves. Moves are tied together by various “natural” logics. Sermons are similarly constructed. They will involve a series of moves—language modules—strung together in some sort of logical movement.

In general, speed of movement will be governed by the size of an audience. One-to-one conversation can travel at breakneck speed. For example, imagine hearing a conversation between two travelers meeting by chance in an airport boarding area:

“Are you going to Chicago?”
 “No, I’m on my way to Traverse City, Michigan.”
 “There’s a Cherry Festival there every summer, isn’t there?”
 “I don’t know. I’m going to a music camp.”
 “You’re a musician?”
 “Maybe someday—I play the French horn.”
 “Oh, that’s supposed to be difficult.”
 “I guess so. I’m struggling.”
 “Well, take some time out to go fishing. There’s salmon now in Lake Michigan.”
 “I think I’ll be too busy practicing.”

If we analyze the conversation, we discover that the two travelers have covered a number of subjects in only a few sentences—Traverse City’s Cherry Festival, a music camp, the difficulty of playing a French horn, salmon fishing, and practice time. Such rapid shifts in subject matter can be maintained in one-to-one conversation. But, if we were to play a recording of the conversation to an audience of two or three hundred people, the language might not register at all. Group consciousness simply cannot handle rapid shifts in subject matter. To move along from subject to subject every few sentences would “freak out” an audience; the effect would be similar to watching a movie film that has been speeded up many times the normal frames per minute. Minds will wander when pace is intense. One-to-one conversation and public address are different kinds of discourse. To form five different subject matters in group consciousness would require at least fifteen minutes of speaking time. Therefore, ministers who have the odd notion that all they have to do in a pulpit is to get up and speak naturally (and comfortably) as if in one-to-one conversation are deluded; nobody will hear what they have to say. Though a sermon may move along like a conversation from one subject matter to another, the movement of speaking is much slower. We all know how to speak one-to-one because much of our lives is spent in conversation; we converse naturally. Speaking to group consciousness, however, is quite different and, indeed, may seem to be unnatural. Public address must be learned.

The slowed-down character of public address may irritate us. We may suppose that, if we cannot cover as many different ideas in public speaking as in one-to-one discussion, preaching is doomed to be superficial, simplistic, and possibly irresponsible. No, the two kinds of speaking are different, and they accomplish quite different purposes. While public address cannot present as many ideas in a short time as can one-to-one talking, it can achieve depth and formational power impossible in the rapid linear movement of everyday conversation. In public address, bunches of sentences carry meaning

that, in conversation, might be phrased in a single sentence. Within a bunch of sentences, not only can we express a meaning, but we can include images, cadences, metaphors, and syntactic patterns so that meaning may be seen and felt and formed in astonishing ways. One-to-one speaking and public address are different mediums—as different as dance from sculpture—though both modes of speaking are highly sophisticated, they do different things. Much one-to-one conversation goes in one ear and out the other, but when public language is shaped with technical proficiency, it can have awesome formational power in human consciousness. One-to-one conversational language may involve a sequence of ideas, many in a brief moment, but public address can approach the simultaneity of human experience as it mingles meaning, image, and affect in unusual ways.

There is evidence to suggest that it may take more time to form a simple meaning in communal consciousness now than in an earlier era, such as the first quarter of the twentieth century, when language was probably more stable. While in one-to-one conversation, we can say “God is a mystery” in the wink of an eye; to form the same understanding in group consciousness—oriented, imaged, explained—may take three to four minutes! A congregation of a few hundred people will not grasp ideas quickly. There is also some indication now that audience attention span is brief—not much more than four minutes to a single conceptual idea. All of which is to remark that in our present age (and for the foreseeable future), the margins within which we speak are narrower than we know. We must take nearly four minutes to form, image, and explore each idea we present; but our speaking will be limited by a congregation’s inability to concentrate on any single notion for much more than four minutes. Thus, within about twenty minutes of speaking to a congregation, we can only discuss perhaps five, and certainly no more than six, different subject matters in sequence. To attempt to bypass the problem and, in a sermon, to chase down ten different ideas in twenty minutes will result in a congregation hearing little—ideas that are not formed in consciousness with care simply do not register; they are heard but not heard, and pass from consciousness in an instant. Though public address cannot present many ideas in a short time, public address can form understandings profoundly, so that they become embedded in the lives of people. We will be irritated at what will seem the intellectual limitations of public address as long as we fail to see what it *does* do, namely, *form* faith-consciousness.

The thought of having to spin out a simple idea such as “God is a mystery” for about three and one-half minutes may trouble prospective preachers. But the expanding of a single idea does not involve mere garrulousness, a repetitious, empty-worded circling of an idea. Speaking imitates the way in which

consciousness grasps and understands, namely through models and images of lived experience. Therefore, if you preach “God is a mystery,” you will have to decide models: Is God like a distant figure? Is God like an impenetrable mistiness unshaped but surrounding us? Does God live behind a shield of unknowing? Moreover, you will search out moments in actual lived experience when human beings do seem to sense God’s Presence-in-Absence—where, when, and how does such awareness occur? You will think out theologically what it is you are attempting to convey and you will analyze cultural notions that may prevent our grasping the mystery of things. There is so much involved in any simple statement that our problem is not how to fill three or four minutes, but how to reduce, shape, and speak within such limits!

Perhaps our anxiety comes from a failure to realize that congregations will *not* do our imaging for us. If we use general categorical terms—chair, house, dog—people do not flash distinctive “pictures” in consciousness as each word is spoken. Thus, if a speaker tells an audience, “I carried my dog out for a walk this morning,” the audience, or more accurately 95 percent of the audience, will picture nothing. (There are always a few people given to overactive imaging, but *only* a few.) Even if some members of the audience will image the sentence, invariably they will do so on the basis of their own experience; if they have a cocker spaniel at home, they will picture their own cocker spaniel. The bald statement, “I carried my dog out for a walk this morning,” will mean little and in fact be unremembered until it is imaged, until an audience can *see* what you are speaking about. They must see the ninety-pound, sick sheepdog in your arms, see how you nearly stumble when your coat catches the swinging storm door, see you navigating the steep stairs to the yard, see how the sun is barely up in the sky (you are wearing pajama pants under your coat), and so on. Good preaching involves the imaging of ideas—the shaping of every conceptual notion by metaphor and image and syntax.

Not only must ideas be visualized, they must be presented along with structures of understanding. Ideas, at least in speaking, are *never abstract*; that is, ideas are never apart from attitudes, emotions, doubts, values, and so forth which people have toward them. Obviously, if you say, “I carried my dog out for a walk,” to all-American pet lovers, the meaning will be very different from saying the same sentence to an isolated tribe that feasts on roast dogmeat daily. Not only will preaching image ideas, preaching will also represent the ways in which we interpret ideas through social attitudes, affective responses, and the like. Inasmuch as preachers live in a congregation and, indeed, share consciousness with a congregation, such representation is not impossible. We are never talking of ideas “out there,” ideas that stand in pure isolation from

virtually a single continuous effort, is the patched and fragmentary collection of odd hours, and of ungenial moods. The discourse, in this way, drags its slow length along through the whole week, and the entire mental labor expended upon it, though apparently so much, is not equal in true productive force, in real originant and influential power, to five hours of continuous glowing composition.

Let the sermonizer, then, proceed upon the maxim of writing continuously, when he writes at all. Let him have his set season for composition. Let him fix the time of writing, and the length of effort, in accordance with his physical strength, and then let him go through with the process of composition, with all the abstraction, absorption, and devotedness of prayer itself. In this way, the very best power of the man, the theologian, and the Christian, will be evolved, and will appear in a discourse that will be fresh, energetic, and impressive. In this way, the sermon would become a more uniformly vivid production, and a more generally vital species of authorship, than it now is.

It must be remembered, however, that this injunction to write continuously, and furiously, is a maxim only for one who has obeyed the other maxims, general and special, that have been laid down for sermonizing. It is no maxim for one who has not. It is one of a series, and pre-supposes obedience to what precedes, and also to what succeeds.

If the preacher has formed a homiletic habit of mind, if his ideal of a sermon is high, if he has trained himself to self-reliance, if he has acquired a spiritual way of thinking, and if he has roused his mind by his subject, and his heart by prayer,—if he has done all this, then what he does in the hour of composition, let him do quickly, and continuously.

3. The third maxim to be followed by the sermonizer, in actual composition, is this: *Avoid prolixity*. By prolixity, is meant a tiresome length which arises from an excessive treatment of a subject,—as excessive explanation, or excessive illustration, or excessive argumentation. Therein, in his treatise upon Rhetoric,¹ enunciates the important distinction between the philosophical, and the rhetorical presentation of truth. The former, is that exhaustive and detailed development of a subject which is proper in the scientific treatise. The latter, is that rapid and condensed, yet methodical, exhibition of thought which is required of the orator, by the circumstances in which he is placed. Recurring to this distinction, the maxim, "Avoid prolixity," is equivalent to the rule, "Exhibit truth rhetorically," in distinction from exhibiting it philosophically or poetically.

The orator, of all men, should know when he is through, and should stop when he is through. The

¹ Book I. chap. x, xi; Book II. chap. iv.

SERMON [DEAL PRESENTATION] ≠ TREATISE
[A WRITTEN PRESENTATION]

preacher should perceive when he has subjected a subject, or a portion of a subject, to a treatment that is sufficient for the purposes of oratory, and should act accordingly. As soon as his presentation has reached the due limits of rhetoric, he should bring it to an end, instantaneously, lest it pass over into a mode of representation that is foreign to the orator, and is inimical to all the aims of an orator. Prolivity, or excessive treatment, arises when the sermonizer continues to dwell upon any part of his discourse, after he has already sufficiently developed it. A plan is prolix, when it is filled up with sub-divisions which are so evidently contained in the principal divisions, that the mind of the auditor feels itself undervalued by their formal enunciation. An argument is prolix, when, from the employment of the philosophical instead of the rhetorical mode of demonstration, it is made tedious by syllogisms instead of enthymemes, and by trains of ratiocination instead of bold and direct appeals to consciousness. An illustration is prolix, when the short and rapid metaphor is converted into the long and detailed simile, or allegory.¹

PROLIXITY
 EXCESSIVE TREATMENT

¹ Figures are now the chief *phor* is the orator's figure, and source of false rhetoric. The the simile is the poet's." The preacher talks trope, instead of metaphor is swift and glancing, talking truth and sense. Aristotle flushing its light instantaneously, the was not an orator, but he held and not impeding the flow of the key to eloquence, by virtue thought and truth; the simile is of his sagacious insight, and sci- the metaphor wire-drawn, de- entific analysis. One of his preg- tailed, and expanded, so as to fill nant remarks is, that "the *meta-* the whole foreground of the dis-

Without, however, entering upon these particulars of plan, proof, and illustration, we would briefly call attention to that prolivity, or excessive and tedious treatment of a subject, which arises from an imperfect mastery of it. Suppose that the sermonizer has not made that general and special preparation for composition which we have described, and yet attempts the production of a sermon. In the first place, his manner of presentation will inevitably be confused; in the second place, it will inevitably be prolix, because it is confused; and in the third place, it will inevitably be tedious, because it is prolix and confused. Instead of handling his theme with that strong, yet easy, grasp, which is natural to a mind that is master of itself and of the truth, he handles it irresolutely, hesitatingly, and awkwardly. Instead of a clear, downright statement, because he *knows* whereof he affirms, he expresses himself obscurely and doubtfully, because he does not certainly and positively know. Statement follows statement, and yet there is little or no progress towards a final statement. Conscious that he has not done justice to the topic, he dares not let it drop, and take up another. Conscious that he has not lodged the truth fairly and surely in the

course with pictorial elements, in prolix poetical fustian, and more which both speaker and hearer of genuine eloquence, in the dis- lose sight of the subject. If this courses of a certain class of diction of the Stagirite were preachers. heeded, there would be less of

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mind of the auditor, he does not leave it, but continues to hover about it, and work at it, in hope of better success in the end. The result is, that instead of crowding the greatest possible amount of matter, into the smallest possible form, the preacher spreads the least possible amount of truth over the widest possible surface. He hammers out his lead very thin. For, in this process, the truth, itself suffers. Instead of appearing in the sermon, as it is in its own nature, bright, dense, and gem-like, under the manipulations of such a workman, it becomes dull and porous. The sacred oration, instead of being a swift, brief, and strong movement of thought, becomes a slow, long, and feeble one.

But prolixity may arise, also, from another cause besides ignorance of the subject. There may be prolixity from too much information. The preacher may have stored his memory with a multifarious knowledge, and not having acquired that thoroughly organizing habit of mind which, like life in nature, sloughs off all that is not needed, this knowledge inundates the sermon. It comes pouring in upon him by a merely passive effort of the memory, while the judgment is unawakened and unemployed, and, borne along upon this general deluge of materials, the preacher becomes the most prolix and tedious of mortals. Long after the topic under consideration has been sufficiently explained to the understanding, he continues to explain. Long after the topic has been sufficiently

illustrated to the imagination, he continues to illustrate. Copiousness of information, unless it is under the regulation and guidance of a strongly methodizing ability, and true rhetorical talent, leads to prolixity as inevitably as sheer ignorance.

While the preacher is on his guard against this fault, he is at the same time to remember that he is dealing with the common mind, and must not be so brief as to be obscure. A certain degree of repetition, even, is required in the sermon, especially if it is highly doctrinal, in order to convey the truth completely. This trait should be managed with great care, however; for, even the common mind is less offended at a nakedness of statement which leaves it something to do, even if it is in the way of supplying ellipses and deficiencies, than it is at an excessive repetition, which tires and tantalizes it. It is impossible to lay down a general rule for the length of a sermon. It will not do to say that it should be thirty minutes in length, or forty-five minutes, or one hour. The length of a discourse will vary with the nature of the theme, and the peculiarities of time and place. And no stiff rule is needed, provided the sermonizer possesses that good judgment, that tact, which discerns when the subject, as a whole, or in its parts, has received a sufficient treatment. It is, in reality, a sort of instinctive feeling which comes in the course of a good rhetorical training and practice, rather than any outward rule, that must decide when the develop

OPPORTUNITY
MINIMUM

daring, and careless, when compelled to be, by the stress of circumstances; and what is more, he will have acquired the ability to be so, without disgrace to his calling, and with success in it.

3. A third general maxim for the sermonizer is this: *In immediate preparation for the pulpit, make no use of the immediate preparation of other minds, but rely solely upon personal resources.* This maxim forbids the use of the skeletons and sermons of other sermonizers, in the process of composition. Such a general preparation as has been described, namely, a homiletic mental habit conjoined with a high ideal, renders this help unnecessary. Such a sermonizer is strong in himself, and needs no supports or crutches; such a preacher is rich in himself, and does not need to borrow. He prefers to follow the leadings of his own well disciplined and well informed mind, rather than to adjust himself to the movements of another, however firm and consecutive they may be.

In this day, when so many aids to sermonizing are being furnished, it is well to form a correct estimate of their real value. These collections of skeletons and plans, more or less filled up, which seem to be multiplying along with the general multiplication of books, ought to be entirely neglected and rejected, by both the theological student and the preacher. As matter of fact, they are neglected by all vigorous and effective sermonizers. They are the resort of the indolent and unfaithful alone.

The only plausible reason that can be urged for using them is, that they furnish material for the study of plans,—that they are necessary to the acquisition of the art of skeletonizing. But a good collection of sermons is of far more worth for this purpose. There is very little discipline, in looking over a plan that has been eliminated from a sermon, by another mind. But there is very great discipline, in taking the sermon itself, and eliminating the plan for ourselves. In the first instance, the mind is passive, in the second it is active. The plan of a truly excellent discourse is so identified with the discourse, is so thoroughly organic and one with the filling up, that it requires great judgment and close examination to dissect it, and separate it from the mass of thought, in which it is lightly, yet strongly imbedded. Why then lose all the benefits of this examination, and exertion of judgment, by employing the collector of skeletons to do this work for us? Why not take the living structure to pieces ourselves, and derive the same knowledge and skill thereby, which the anatomist acquires from a personal dissection of a subject? It is only by actual analysis, that actual synthesis becomes possible. It is only by an actual examination of the parts of an oration, and an actual disentanglement of them from the matter of the discourse, that we can acquire the ability of putting parts together, and building up a methodical structure ourselves. In stead, therefore, of buying a collection of skeletons,

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fathers. But as Leith points out, "Calvin made little use of the fathers of the church in his preaching. Likewise, he found little need for secondary aids to confirm the meaning and significance of Scripture."³⁷ In short, Calvin was content with "an analytical method which interprets and evaluates verse after verse, word after word."³⁸ He showed little concern to supplement his exposition with quotations from other authors. For Calvin, nothing must overshadow the Word.

✿ DISTINCTIVE NO. 23: UNSPOKEN OUTLINE

As Calvin preached, a clear structure of thought for the sermon existed in his orderly, brilliant mind, but no sermon outline was announced from the pulpit. As Leith puts it, Calvin "did not fashion his sermons according to logical outline."³⁹ That is to say, homiletical headings were not used in his expositions.

To be sure, Calvin did articulate his major thrusts, which were arranged in tight paragraphs of well-developed thought. But the arrangement of the message did not follow a stated outline with recognizable divisions. For Calvin, there were no designated points to the sermon, such as "First," "Second," and so forth. Neither were there polished, alliterative headings, such as "The Purpose of Prayer," "The Particulars of Prayer," and the like. Instead, Calvin moved through the biblical text without sharply defined major headings. There was a natural flow to the message—"sentence-by sentence, sometimes even word by word, explaining what each part means"⁴⁰—that gave

it an unhindered, conversational feel.

As Calvin expounded the biblical text, he established subordinate truths that lined up under the major headings, although these supporting thrusts were not necessarily stated as such. Calvin's sermon on Job 21:13-15, the eightieth from one of his series on the book, shows this organization (see Appendix B, pages 136-139). The headings were numbered by Parker, but were not stated in the sermon.

Once again, in this practice, we see that Calvin, though he preached without notes, was hardly unprepared when he entered the pulpit. Rather, his message was organized with great detail in his brilliant mind.

✿ DISTINCTIVE NO. 24: SEAMLESS TRANSITIONS

Calvin also employed smooth transitions as he proceeded from one main thought to the next. Such transitions serve as bridges in communication, ushering the listener to the next heading of truth. Because he was concerned with the flow of thought in his messages, Calvin made sure his sermons were skillfully connected at the seams.

Consider some of the transitional phrases from his first sermon on Micah. Calvin pulled his listeners along as he introduced new paragraphs of thought with the following segues: "At the same time . . . Furthermore . . . But let us consider . . . It is time now, to summarize . . . In addition, we might wonder why . . . Now it is quite true that . . . On the contrary . . . From

1, I could say, "And so we do worry sometimes about our daily material needs. Now, such worry has a huge drawback. Worry can make 'making a living' the primary focus of life. We live to earn a paycheck. Our reason for being is nothing more than paying the bills." Then I can develop the idea.

After I have developed point 2, I can bring closure and move to point 3 by saying, "Because worry consumes our thoughts, it makes 'making a living' the primary focus of life. But Jesus says life is more than making a living. God created us to set our hearts on more than money, food, and housing payments." This is a natural, conversational way to transition between points.

One additional thing to watch for with sequential points: Be sure to stay on one subject. If we are not careful, a sequence of ideas

can begin on one subject and three points later end on another subject. This is especially likely in a topical sermon drawn from various texts. For example:

- God loves us.
- We should love others.
- We may not feel like loving others.
- Our feelings can lead us astray.
- False teachers can also lead us astray.

All points must be subordinate to one overarching subject. In the Luke text above, my overarching subject is "How to experience God's highest purpose for your life."

You will probably not use sequential points in every message, but for many texts they produce interesting, biblical sermons. If parallel points has been your only form of preaching, sequential points can open a whole new sermon world.

Chapter 95

OUTLINES THAT WORK FOR YOU, NOT AGAINST YOU

How to write sermon points that follow the way people think

Steven D. Mathewson

Twenty students and two professors stared at the handwriting on the wall. One by one, students in a seminary preaching class were to project on overheads their first attempts at a sermon outline from an assigned passage. I waited apprehensively for my turn. My friend, Rod, was up first. Rod looked at his transparency and read aloud his main points for a potential sermon on 1 Samuel 17, the David-Goliath story:

- Goliath Challenges God's People.
- Saul Cowers with God's People.
- David Conquers for God's People.

After a pause, Haddon Robinson, the lead professor, growled: "That sounds like it came out of a book called *Simple Sermons for Sunday Evening*." The class erupted with laughter. Nervous laughter. Sympathetic laughter. "Nobody talks like this anymore, except in the pulpit,"

he continued. Duane Litfin, guest professor, chimed in: "What Haddon is saying is that he's afraid you might go out and actually preach that sermon!" More laughter.

The outline stage in sermon preparation is, for some, the most intimidating step in the process. Homiletics author Bryan Chapell says, "In the classroom and in seminars around the country, I find that preachers have more questions about structure than they do about any other aspect of preaching." So how do we write sermon outlines that are not trite, communicate in a natural way, and present our ideas clearly? Here are three strategies.

USE COMPLETE SENTENCES

One of the key purposes of a sermon outline is to track the sermon's flow of thought. Out of this purpose flows the first strategy: State your outline points in full sentences. According to Haddon Robinson, since each point in the outline represents an idea, it should be a complete sentence. When words and phrases stand as points, they deceive us because they are incomplete and vague. Partial statements allow thought to slip through our minds like a greased football.

Writing an outline is a way of thinking. You will short-circuit the thinking process if you do not write out your points in complete sentences. You can't evaluate clarity of thought or the logical progression of your ideas if all you see are lone words.

DON'T TRY TO MAKE IT MEMORABLE

The second strategy is: Don't try to create outlines people will remember. It took me years of preaching to figure this out. I sincerely believed that listeners would be better for tak-

ing my outline points home with them—either in their heads or, better yet, on paper. Without a "captioned survey" of either the passage or the principles in it, how would people get the text into their lives?

The problem is modern listeners are not used to getting information in a captioned survey format. Neither Dan Rather nor Dan Patrick communicate information like this. Their presentation follows a conversational flow.

A few months ago, Lisa, a close family friend, called and asked me what appendicitis pain feels like. Her husband, Eric, was on a business trip in California and was feeling an excruciating pain in his lower abdominal region. Because I had my appendix removed about three years earlier, Lisa wanted my input. Imagine how canned my reply would have sounded if it had followed this outline:

The Character of Appendicitis Pain

- It is an excruciating pain.
- It is an enveloping pain.

The Context of Appendicitis Pain

- Its locus is abdominal.
- Its focus is appendicital.

The Cancellation of Appendicitis Pain

- It requires reflection by the doctor.
- It requires removal of the organ.
- It requires rest for the patient.

The advantage of this kind of presentation is that Lisa could easily follow it. Alliterating the three main points with the letter C (Character, Context, and Cancellation) provides a memory aid. But obviously, this kind of communication is unnatural. It's boring, and it doesn't work the way conversation usually flows.

As a preacher of God's Word, your goal is to communicate the ideas in a text and to point out the controlling thought or "big idea." Ideas gel in people's minds through words and pictures. I

Chapter 94

THE POWER OF SEQUENCE

Should you use parallel points or sequential points?

Craig Brian Larson

The sermon form I cut my teeth on uses parallel points. Every point in the sermon bridges out of the transition in the introduction, so that all the points are parallel. For example, in a sermon on Luke 12:22-34, the transition sentence could be "Jesus gives us five reasons not to worry." The key word is "reasons." Every point offers a reason not to worry, and so every point is parallel in logic, bridging from the one transition. Here is a possible outline:

- Jesus gives us five reasons not to worry:
 - God intends life to be much more significant than just getting food and clothing.
 - We can depend on God to provide for us better than he does for plants and animals.
 - Worry accomplishes nothing.
 - Worry makes us like those who do not know God.
 - God promises to provide for those who seek his kingdom.

This form of preaching—keyword with parallel points—has the advantage of clarity. In addition, it suits texts that have parallel ideas or lists. But not all texts have that shape, especially narratives, psalms, and longer sections of letters. When we try to force a text without parallel ideas into the grid I describe above, we may distort the text. Or we may neglect important ideas in the text that do not fit the logic of our parallel points (or may shoehorn them into our outline).

In the example above, what can I do with an important idea in the text that does not give a reason to avoid worry? Verses 32-34 do not provide straightforward reasons not to worry, but they climax what Jesus says. Life is not just food and clothes; life is ultimately about experiencing the kingdom of God. In the satisfying life of the kingdom, we are so free from seeking food and clothes that we can actually seek ways to give our things away!

If I feel bound to my parallel points, I might not include verses 32-34 in my sermon text, which would truncate this Scripture's full, intended message. Another downside of parallel points can be predictability. Once we have given the transition sentence in the introduction, everyone knows where the sermon is going. What we gain in clarity we may lose in suspense. If hearers are passionately interested in every reason not to worry, predictability is a positive; if they are not interested, it is a negative. Whatever is predictable can bore both us and our hearers.

SEQUENTIAL POINTS

But there is an alternative. Our points don't have to be parallel; they can be sequential. Each idea can flow into the next rather than all flow out of the transition sentence in the introduction. Point 1 leads to point 2. Point 2 leads to

point 3. Point 3 leads to point 4. It's simple, logical, compelling.

Here is a topical sermon with points that follow sequential logic:

- God loves every person.
- But not every person responds to God's love.
- People can reject God's love because God gives people the freedom to choose.
- Our free choice has consequences.
- And so, I urge you to respond to God's love.

Notice how each point in this topical sermon flows out of the preceding point and leads to the next point. The points cannot be rearranged, as they could be in a parallel structure.

Here is a sequential outline based on the exposition of a single verse, 1 Peter 4:10:

- Each of us has received a spiritual gift from God.
- These spiritual gifts come in many forms.
- No matter what our gifts are, they place on us the responsibility to be faithful managers of them.
- Identify and use your gift!

Or again, using the longer Luke passage above (Luke 12:22-34), if I develop points in sequential logic I might have the following outline:

- Sometimes we are tempted to worry about our daily material needs (v. 22).
- Such worry can make "making a living" the primary focus of life (v. 30).
- Jesus says life is more than making a living (v. 23).
- Worry actually prevents us from experiencing what God intends life to be (vv. 29-30, 34).
- We can trust God to provide for us (vv. 24, 27-28).
- We find real life in seeking and experiencing God's kingdom (vv. 31-34).

One great advantage of sequential points is that they keep the interest of listeners. Sequential points follow patterns that people instinctively respond to, such as a problem-solution or question-answer pattern. Notice in the Luke example that points 1, 2, and 4 explore the human problem, creating interest. Point 3 hints at an answer, and 5 and 6 give the full answer to our human need. The sequential approach follows an inductive rather than deductive logic, delaying the full discovery to the latter part of the sermon.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

One significant difference between preaching in parallel points versus sequential points is the transitions. With parallel points we typically transition between the points by numbering them and repeating the keyword. "The first reason not to worry. . . . The second reason not to worry. . . ." Calling attention to parallel points in this way brings clarity. It is simple for people to follow our structure because we mark points with a flashing light.

With sequential points, things get foggy if we do not carefully highlight the shift between points. Numbering and key words do not suit this form as well. (Although sequential point sermons can use the often-heard keywords *principles or points* or "things I want to say," and we can number those, this usually makes for awkward transitions.)

The solution is to repeat and rephrase points. As we conclude each point, we should repeat or rephrase the point, then state the next point and repeat and rephrase it two or three times before proceeding to develop it.

For example, in the Luke sermon above, after I finished explaining and illustrating point

Preaching Clinic for Elders
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Session #4b – Constructing Your Outline

1. The Explain, Prove, and Apply Drill
2. You already have your homiletical point. This point derives from the text, connects with the congregation, and carries an application. This point also guides you in the construction of your sermon outline.
3. Go back to the list of items under "Explain" in the previous part of the procedure, "Explain, Prove, and Apply." You have already used one of the applications to formulate your homiletical point. Now take items from the "Explain" column and list six of them as potential sermon moves. If you have items under "Prove," you may want to use one or two of these items also.
4. In making this list, remember two critical things: (1) The goal you have as given in the Homiletical Point, (2) the logic of the steps leading you and the congregation to the goal given in the Homiletical Point.
5. You now have a Homiletical Point and six words or phrases underneath the Homiletical Point. Examine the order of these six words or phrases. Are they in an order that leads you to the conclusion you desire? The Homiletical Point gives you your conclusion. If not, rearrange the order of the words or phrase so that there is a good simple logical order. Note the portions of the text you wish to address with each word.
6. Good simple logic gives force to your sermon and helps you in the delivery of your sermon. "It is simplicity that gives a speech its power" (Peggy Noonan, *On Speaking Well*, 50). A complex sermon will have less force. You will also have more difficulty in delivery. Have good simple order in your sermon. *This means you may not follow the order of the text as you put together your outline.* "In analyzing and dividing his text, he [the minister/preacher] is to regard more the order of the matter than of words" [The Directory for the Publick Worship of God, *Of the Preaching of the Word*, in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1997), 379].
7. The list of six words or phrases is more of an *exegetical* outline. It gives you a list of things to explain or prove. This is not a sermon outline. It is not a homiletical outline. You must make this outline homiletical. The first step is to put each word or phrase into a complete sentence. You have two things to remember in doing this: (1) There must be good logical flow in the outline leading to the Homiletical Point and, (2) There must be a logical connection between moves in the outline.
8. Perfect the sentence outline and make it as homiletical as possible. That is, connect each statement with the congregation where possible. Formulate statements that either carry an application or allow you to make application as you go through your sermon.
9. Finally, make sure there is good coordination between where the sermon outline leads you and what the Homiletical Point states. If there is a difference, even a slight difference, adjust either your sentence outline or your homiletical point.

Exercise with 1 Corinthians 10:13

Proposed Exegetical Point: God is faithful and sovereign in carrying us through our common testing.

Explain

Prove

Apply

Proposed Homiletical Point: Your job loss is part of God's testing of you and He will carry you through.

Refined HP: Trust Christ in the midst of unemployment; He is testing you and will carry you through.

I CORINTHIANS 10:1-13

SUBJECT: WHAT IS THE TEXT ABOUT?

ANSWER: GOD TESTING THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH IN THE SAME WAY HE TESTED THE CHURCH IN THE WILDERNESS.

COMPLEMENT: WHAT DOES THE TEXT TELL US ABOUT GOD TESTING THE CHURCH IN CORINTH IN THE SAME WAY HE TESTED THE CHURCH IN THE WILDERNESS?

ANSWER: THE CORINTHIANS MUST NOT FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF THE CHURCH IN THE WILDERNESS BUT REALIZE CHRIST'S PRESENCE & PERSEVERE

EP = COMBINE SUBJECT & COMPLEMENT

POSSIBLE E.P. - SINCE GOD TESTS THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH IN THE SAME WAY HE TESTED THE CHURCH IN THE WILDERNESS, PAUL WARNS THE CORINTHIANS NOT TO FOLLOW THEIR EXAMPLE BUT REALIZE CHRIST'S PRESENCE & PERSEVERE IN TESTING.

EP, TEST - CAN I SPEAK TO ALL PARTS OF THE TEXT USING THIS E.P.?

SIGNIFICANCE - PART OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS TEXT IS IN THE REASON FOR GOD'S TESTING. SEE DEUT 8:1-3. THE REASON FOR THIS IS THAT PAUL COMPARES THE CHURCH IN THE WILDERNESS & THE N.T. CHURCH. CHRIST IS W/BOTH.

EXPLAIN

CHURCH IN WILDERNESS

1-4

CHRIST'S PRESENCE

MOSES / BAPTISM

CLOUD / SEA

REASON FOR TESTING DEUT 8

5

ISRAEL'S FAILURE

6 & 11

EXAMPLES / TYPES

6 - EVIL CRAVINGS

11 - END OF AGE

7-10

IBOLATRY

IMMORALITY

TESTING GOD

GRUMBING

RESPONSE TO TESTS

12

WARNING

CHURCH

END OF AGE

TEST / TEMPTATION

COMMON TESTS

13

LIMITED

OUTCOME PROVIDED

ENDURANCE

REFINED E.P.

APPLICATION

COMMON TESTS

PERSEVERE IN TESTING

LEARN FROM O.T. CHURCH

CHURCH IN WILDERNESS VS CHURCH OF END OF AGES AND

← SIMILARITY OF TESTING (SUBJECT IN E.P.)

PROVE

TEMPTATION = TESTS

POSSIBLE SERMON POINT OR HOMILETICAL POINT: "LEARN FROM THE O.T. CHURCH AND PERSEVERE IN YOUR TESTING."

PAUL EXHORTS THE CORINTHIANS TO LEARN FROM THE O.T. CHURCH IN WILDERNESS & WARNS THEM NOT NOT TO FOLLOW THEIR EXAMPLE BUT REALISE CHRIST'S PRESENCE AND PERSEVERE IN TESTING

1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-13 (POSSIBLE MOVES)

H.P. - "LEARN FROM THE O.T. CHURCH & PERSEVERE
IN YOUR TESTING."

- ① WILDERNESS CHURCH & TESTING (VS 1-4) + (DEUT 8:1-3)
- ② EXAMPLES/TYPES (VS 6 & 12)
- ③ ISRAEL'S FAILURE (VS 5 & 12)
- ④ WARNING - DON'T FOLLOW EXAMPLE (VS 7-10)
- ⑤ TESTS COMMON/LIMITED/ENDEAVOURABLE (VS 13)
- ⑥ BETTER OUTCOME ASSURED

PUTTING BULLET POINTS IN SENTENCES ;
 1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-13 - ADJUSTING THE OUTLINE

LEARN FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT CHURCH ; PERSEVERE IN YOUR TESTING

~~GOD PUTS~~ PAUL SETS BEFORE US (VS 1-4)

1. THE CHURCH IN THE WILDERNESS THROUGH EXTENSIVE TESTING
 (VERSES 1-4 ; DEUT 8:1-3)

① THAT CHURCH WENT THROUGH EXTENSIVE TESTING

② THIS PERIOD OF TESTING PROVIDES US A SET OF EXAMPLES
 (VERSES 6 ; 11) ; IN THE CHURCH TODAY,

(DEUT 8:1-3)

3. ~~BUT ISRAEL FAILED THE TESTS GIVEN TO THEM IN THE WILDERNESS~~
 ISRAEL'S FAILURE IN THE WILDERNESS REVEALED HER HEART
 (VERSES 5 ; 12 ; ~~12~~ ⁴ PAUL DEUTERONOMY 8:1-3)

③ SO PAUL ISSUES A WARNING ; DON'T FOLLOW THEIR EXAMPLE
 INTO SIMILAR DISASTEROUS RESULTS (VERSES 7-10)

5. YOUR TESTING IS NOT ^{UNIQUE} UNCOMMON ; ^{BUT} IT IS LIMITED & ENURABLE
 (VERSE 13)

6

6. ~~GOD ASSURES YOU~~ A BETTER OUTCOME (VS 13).

DIVISIONS W/IN CHURCH

I AM OF PAUL / I AM OF PETER

vs 10

KORAH'S REBELLION / GRUMBING

INCEST W/IN THE CHURCH

FOOD & IDOLS

CHALLENGES TO HIS AUTHORITY

vs 9

← IMMORALITY VS 8 MOSES' BAAL PEOR

← VS 7 IDOLATRY / MOSES INTERCEDES FOR PEOPLE

GRUMBING AGAINST MOSES SMITTEN

BY SERPENTS - CHRIST

DETAILS

GOD'S TESTS, GOD'S OUTCOMES

1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-13

LEARN FROM THE O.T. CHURCH $\frac{1}{2}$ PERSEVERE IN YOUR TESTING.

1. PAUL SETS THE CHURCH IN THE WILDERNESS BETWEEN YOU $\frac{1}{2}$ ME (VERSES 1-4).
2. THE CHURCH IN THE WILDERNESS WENT THROUGH EXTENSIVE TESTING (DEUT 8:1-3).
3. ISRAEL'S TESTING IN THE WILDERNESS REVEALED HER HEART; THE SAME GOES FOR YOU (VERSES 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ 12 $\frac{1}{2}$; DEUT 8:1-3).
4. THAT CHURCH IN THE WILDERNESS IS AN EXAMPLE FOR US IN THE CHURCH TODAY [CHRIST IS IN YOUR MIDST] (VERSES 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ 11).
5. DON'T FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF THE CHURCH IN THE WILDERNESS W/SIMILAR RESULTS (VERSES 7-10).
6. YOUR TESTING IS NOT ^{UNIQUE} UNCOMMON BUT LIMITED, ENDURABLE, AND HAS A BETTER OUTCOME (VERSE 13).