

Article by Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley, first published in *Irish Baptist* magazine, Nov. 1986

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Preparing the Sermon

Begin in Time:

“The only way to preach well is to begin ten years ago”, advises James Black – much to the discomfiture of the preacher! These words are a timely reminder that sermon preparation is not just the work of a few hours or days before the message is preached. A sermon is the outflow of a life and is a reflection of the whole intellectual and spiritual development of the preacher over many years. The future does not come to us out of tomorrow but out of yesterday and today.

These factors help to set sermon preparation in its true context and caution the preacher that his ministry in coming days will be largely determined by the kind of man he was, and is now. The depth of a man’s communion with God and his spiritual experience in all the varied circumstances of life will be mirrored in the quality and character of his preaching. What was said of Robert Murray McCheyne is true of every preacher – “His teaching was in a manner the development of his soul’s experience. It was a giving out of the inward life.”

But this is only one of the many ingredients which play an essential part in indirectly preparing a man for his pulpit ministry. There is also unremitting Bible study which James Stewart describes as the one condition for the Lord to provide sufficient material for the constant demands of the pulpit as the weeks and years go by. In addition to his Bible and theological study, the preacher will also benefit from reading “thought breeding” books and those which stretch his mental muscles. He will also discover great value in reading books whose stance is very different from his own for they will force him to think clearly and honestly about his own convictions. Through the use of the newspaper, the television, and many other sources of information, he will be made aware of what is happening in the world in which his congregation have to live their lives. As he accumulates information he will also endeavour to be a thinker and never be content to peddle other men’s opinion in the pulpit.

But the preacher must not only know books; he must know people as well. As he carefully studies human nature in its many moods he will be aware of men’s struggles, problems and ways of thinking. Faithful pastoral visitation will be particularly helpful in getting to know intimately the congregation to whom he ministers – though naturally he will be most careful never to betray any confidence which has been entrusted to him.

There is therefore a sense in which the preacher is always on duty as he goes through life with a watchful eye and a listening ear, since all that he learns and all that happens to him is certain to have some relevance to his ministry. In the light of these things it is obvious that an inseparable companion of the preacher will be a good notebook in which he can immediately make a permanent record of all the material that he gathers. In this will go sermon outlines on a number of themes as ideas come to him and as he acquires information and facts which will provide colour and illustration for his sermons. The man who cultivates the habit of using his notebook and who regularly

replenishes his store of outlines is never likely to be in a state of desperation late on a Saturday night. His people will never be among those hungry sheep, described by Milton, who “look up and are not fed.”

Since the richness of a preacher’s ministry is in strict proportion to the richness of his mind and soul there will always be a freshness and vigour about the ministry of a man who is constantly preparing himself. It is a tragedy that the preaching of such men, even when it remains absolutely true to the Word, is not always appreciated as it ought to be. “Not a few”, laments R.E.O.White, “will judge the sermon by the faithfulness of the preacher in treading the path which, given that text, “sound” preachers have always followed. This attitude kills preaching as it kills all Bible study and spells death to all spiritual life and Christian progress.”

#### Selecting a Text:

In response to the prayerful reading of the Scriptures it is frequently the experience of the preacher that a text will give him a hearty grip from which there is no release. On other occasions a relevant sermon will be prompted by an assessment of the spiritual condition and needs of a congregation. The wise preacher will also make full use of the Christian year which White describes as “the finest aid to Christian education and to Christian witness”. In other words the basic Christian truths represented by Christmas, Good Friday, Easter and Whitsun will be preached on at the appropriate times in the year. In commending this practice, Martin Lloyd Jones comments, “I believe that the danger confronting most of us is to become so interested in the implications and the outworking of the Christian faith that we tend to forget the essence and the very foundations of the faith. We assume them but perhaps never preach them ... So these special occasions have great value in this respect, that they, in a sense, compel us to go back, and to remind ourselves of these things which after all are the fundamentals on which our whole position rests.” In addition the New Year, Harvest, Bible Sunday and similar anniversaries all suggest prominent Biblical themes about which the congregation need a regular reminder if they are not going to be spiritually impoverished.

As they are considering the next subject with which they should deal, men in the fulltime ministry sometimes review their pulpit work up to the present. This can be a very salutary experience, for they are often astonished and disturbed as they wake up to the serious gaps in their preaching despite their best endeavours to present the whole counsel of God. How often has the congregation been confronted with the full range of Christian doctrine, ethical duty, and spiritual experience? How often have the people heard sermons based on the various kinds of Biblical literature each interpreted according to its distinctive nature – history, prayers, psalms, proverbs, biography, character study, and laws? How often have sermons been preached on Old Testament subjects in comparison with those which are based on the New Testament? How often has the teaching of Jesus Christ in the Synoptic Gospels been expounded, compared with the very extensive use which has normally been made of the Pauline Epistles? How often have the particular concerns and problems of the various kinds of people who are found in the congregation been dealt with from the pulpit? Well does Spurgeon urge us, “Let us abhor all one-sidedness, all exaggeration of one truth and disparagement of another and let us endeavour to paint the portrait of truth with balanced features and blended colours.”

Whatever choice of sermon is made the preacher will be well advised to avoid eccentric, fanciful and sensational subjects and keep to deep and abiding truths. These are the themes which quicken the thought and arouse the heart of the preacher and which leave their mark on the congregation. "You cannot drop the big themes and create great saints", warns J.H.Jowett.

It is sometimes debated whether a pastor should preach sermons on what can be called "odd texts" or as a connected series. Surely there is room for both. If the Spirit can guide a man to preach on individual texts he can also guide him to a series. The advantage of the latter is that it provides the congregation with consecutive teaching on one theme, while it relieves the preacher of the weekly search for a text. But it is vital that he is not imprisoned by his plan for the series but is always open to fresh guidance from the Spirit.

The subjects for series are legion. Among many others which could be mentioned are: the people who met Jesus, the paragraph by paragraph exposition of a book, the symbols of the Holy Spirit, a book expounded by the problems or events mentioned in it, the "I am's" of Jesus, the minor prophets and modern problems, heroes of the faith, the miracles and parables of Jesus, Christian foundations, the Lord's prayer, Paul's missionary journeys and the Sermon on the Mount. In planning different series it is highly desirable to ring the changes because variety is essential to hold the interest of the congregation.

The length of the series depends very much on the ability of the preacher and the capacity of the congregation and so it is impossible to lay down rigid rules for every case. But unless he is very experienced, a man would be well advised to begin modestly, making three months the maximum at first. He ought at all costs to avoid the mistake of the Puritan preacher Joseph Caryl who over a period of seven years is said to have subjected every verse of the book of Job to a microscope examination. Commencing with a congregation of eight hundred he was left at the end with eight persons – "faint yet pursuing"! Looking back over his youth Spurgeon records that he had a lively or rather a deadly recollection of a certain series on Hebrews which made a deep impression of the most undesirable kind on his mind. "I wished frequently that the Hebrews had kept the epistle to themselves for it sadly bored one Gentile lad." The epistle exhorts men to "suffer" the word of exhortation and "we did so" he adds grimly. The same epistle proved a problem to Graham Scroggie in his early ministry. After four or five sermons he noticed that the attendance was not increasing and one person wrote saying he would return when he heard that the series was finished! "Since then", he said, "I have never ventured upon a series of more than four addresses, at most five."

Needless to say every sermon in a series should be complete in itself. There is little point in telling visitors who are present for one Sunday only that if they want to hear the conclusion of the matter they must turn up to the next week's thrilling instalment! And if in introducing the sermon a brief resume is given of last week's message in the series, let it be brief.

#### Preparing the Message

James Black has suggested that sermon preparation requires three tools – a spade to dig into the subject for its meaning, a rake to gather together all available ideas and illustrations, and a riddle to sort out those things which are strictly relevant from those which have no direct bearing on the subject of the sermon.

In examining the passage on which his sermon will be based, the preacher will note its real thrust together with its relationship to the immediate context and to the wider context of the book in which it is found. As questions are put to the passage so it yields up its secrets and its real significance. In this connection many have found help in remembering some famous lines of Rudyard Kipling:-

*“I keep six honest serving men  
(They taught me all I know)  
Their names are what and why and when  
And how and where and who.”*

In the process of gathering material it is helpful to write down everything which may possibly be of value – the meaning of the original, the ways in which various versions have rendered the text, illustrations, ideas noted during indirect preparation, Biblical connections and parallels, insights from others who have preached on the passage (though an honest man will make sure he does not preach their sermons!) problems and questions which are likely to arise in the minds of his listeners and the ways in which the text may be applied.

At this point everything must then be brought under the scrutiny of the theme and purpose of the sermon. All the masters of homiletics insist that in every sermon there must be one over-riding aim which can preferably be expressed in a single sentence. What is the objective of the sermon? What truth is it meant to teach? What response is sought from the congregation? The preacher ought always to aim to do one thing and to do it well. Those who aim at nothing invariably hit it! And if the purpose is not crystal clear to the man in the pulpit there is not the slightest chance that it will be clear to the man in the pew. As J.C.Ryle put it, “If you begin in a fog you may depend upon it that you will leave your people in the darkness.” Changing the picture somewhat, Haddon Robinson compares some sermons to a dropped lemon meringue pie – “they splatter over everything but hit nothing very hard.”

As he sees the end from the beginning the preacher will carefully sift his material and retain only those things which unmistakably contribute to the accomplishment of his purpose. It is of course difficult for him to be ruthless and so reject information or illustrations which are often valuable in themselves and which have cost a lot of time to unearth. Yet reject them he must, if they are not strictly relevant else the congregation will be led down a series of cul-de-sacs and will never arrive at their true destination.

While every sermon ought to contain substantial teaching which will really feed the listeners, it is utter folly for a man to try to put all his theology into one sermon. If he does, he need not be surprised if his congregation are reduced to a state of total bewilderment after being assailed by a mass of unrelated ideas. A sermon should be a bullet and not buckshot.

It is very helpful for a text to be chosen early in the week even though the finished product may not see the light of day until Friday or Saturday. In this way the material can simmer in the subconscious as the preacher is engaged on other tasks or while he is asleep. While the conscious mind drops the theme the subconscious continues to work on it, gathering, organizing and ferreting out half forgotten facts. Many a man has discovered after a period of sleep that material hitherto undigested and in a disorderly shape has been reduced to order and has come to maturity of expression.

Preachers frequently discuss whether it is better to write a sermon in full or to preach it from notes, relying on natural fluency of speech. It is impossible to lay down rigid rules, for men differ widely in temperament and gift. Writing out a sermon in full develops precision, clarity, ordered thought, terseness of expression and at the same time restrains the trivial off-the-cuff remark. If reading makes a full man, writing makes an exact man. Many have also discovered that the very act of writing helps to stimulate thought and generate ideas. On the other hand it can be argued that writing can imprison a preacher and prevent him from being open to new ideas during the course of delivering his sermon. It can also create a barrier between him and his listeners. Others prefer, therefore, to preach from brief notes and so cultivate a free and spontaneous style. But this method, however, also has its disadvantages because its practitioners sometimes can become at best monotonously repetitive and at worst mere windbags who have finished long ago but are quite unable to stop!

W.E.Sangster's practice for many years was to use one method for the morning sermons and the other for the evening sermon so that each method helped the other. Gradually the need to write out the sermon in full receded and he would then write out only the beginning and the end together with the more closely reasoned parts of the sermon. Another way to secure the benefits of both methods is to write out the sermon in full in the study, but to be so familiar with its contents that it can be preached from brief notes in the pulpit. There is no doubt that it is a great advantage for the man in the pulpit to look his congregation in the face in order to maintain as much contact with them as possible, and also to observe their reactions.

#### The Shadow of a Listening People:

A sermon is not an essay or a theological lecture but a message spoken from one heart to another. It follows, therefore, that the preacher ought to try to visualize his congregation in their different needs and circumstances, as he prepares his theme, choice of words, illustrations and applications. As far as is humanly possible it should be his concern through his ministry to help everyone in the congregation.

In the pulpit the preacher may be enjoying himself declaiming and theologizing but what does it all mean to the congregation? White challenges preachers to ask themselves, "Will this message really interest anyone other than myself?" He goes on to say that the man who can bring himself to ask the question and honestly answer it, is on the way to becoming a compelling speaker. A complaint which is constantly heard is that sermons are just not earthed so that they become relevant to the listeners. They are strong on exposition but weak on application, and many a long suffering congregation will confirm the opinion of A.W.Tozer that there is nothing so dull as Bible doctrine taught for its own sake. As duties should be preached doctrinally, so doctrines should be preached practically. Haddon Robinson expresses the point very

bluntly when he says, “Seldom do normal people lose sleep over the Jebusites, the Canaanites or the Perizzites, or even about what Abraham, Moses and Paul had said or done. They lie awake wondering about grocery prices, crop failures, quarrels with a girlfriend, diagnosis of a malignancy, a frustrating sex life, and the rat race where only rats seem to win. If the sermon does not make much difference in that world, they wonder if it makes any difference at all.” One who has regularly occupied a pew for years and endured not a few irrelevant sermons has suggested that these words ought to be written in letters of gold on the walls of every preacher’s study!

Every time a congregation assembles there are always represented in its ranks the basic human problems – the search for God, the burden arising from a sense of guilt, an inquiry about purpose of life, the difficulty of coping with life’s problems, the need to come to terms with the mystery of suffering, secret fears about health and the future, the way to find hope in despair, the shock of sudden bereavement, the answer to current social problems, and the urgency of overcoming the fear of death. The congregation’s point of need is the preacher’s point of contact. In being sensitive to the condition of his congregation he will endeavour to lead them to the living Christ who is able to deal with the human situation in all its variety, and show them how to appropriate all his resources as they walk the Christian way.

#### Sermon Preparation is not Enough

But at the end of the day it is also important to realize that preparing a sermon is not the same as preparing to preach. Before he can proclaim the Word of God effectively the preacher must prepare himself. Since one important aspect of preaching is “truth through personality” let him ensure that his personality, together with all his individual gifts, is fully consecrated to the Lord. He must be under the authority of the Holy Spirit not only in the preparation of the message but also in its delivery else it will be a hollow performance indeed. After hearing a particularly impressive sermon by Alexander Whyte a listener remarked to him, “You preached as if you came straight from the presence.” “Perhaps I did”, was the reply.