

# **The Mechanics of Preaching**

Louis Rushmore

## **Organization**

Versus aimless rambling with one's words, to be an effective communicator, one must organize his thoughts. This is especially true when one purposes to communicate the Word of God to his fellow man; no communication is as important as or more desperately needed by humanity than divine revelation. Therefore, preachers and teachers must carefully prepare beforehand how to convey selected truths from God's Word; the sheer volume of divine revelation (the Bible) and the limited capacity of mortals to absorb it on any one occasion, the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27) must be proclaimed in installments. The whole counsel of God needs to be preached, but not all at once and not in such a disorganized fashion that it is incomprehensible.

The most important element to a well-organized presentation (including sermons and Bible studies) is the thesis or purpose statement. Nothing belongs in a particular sermon or Bible lesson that does not pertain to and explain the thesis or purpose statement. While various sermons or Bible lessons, indeed, may contain a wide range of biblical material, not every biblical truth belongs in the same outline. The thesis or purpose statement needs to be carefully worded to be direct and simple enough to allow the subsequent outline to explain it thoroughly within the anticipated available time allotment. One must guard against making either a vague thesis or purpose statement or making the thesis or purpose statement too long or complicated.

The thesis or purpose statement is the anchor for the sermon to which one organizing his thoughts (usually in written form) repeatedly visits throughout the process of organization and composition of one's outline. While some people do not need to use an outline or notes while preaching or teaching, one must at least refer to a mental outline while publicly speaking, especially to ensure that he makes an organized, understandable presentation while avoiding as much as possible unintended and pointless repetition (not all repetition is unintended or pointless, 2 Peter 1:12-15; 3:1).

One's well-organized thoughts need to be balanced, respecting quantity and discernible transition from point to point. It must be apparent to the auditor of one's preaching and teaching what the purpose of the sermon or Bible study is, as well as that the presenter has clearly and adequately demonstrated that the thesis statement has been satisfactorily developed

The best communicators lead their hearers not merely to acquire information, but challenge the auditors of their speeches to act consciously upon the facts presented (e.g., repent, apply to themselves, commit themselves, etc.). Good preachers and teachers exhibit genuine enthusiasm for the object of their preaching and teaching (i.e., not just speaking more loudly, but become animated by the subject matter); they pass this zeal for the Word of God to the honest hearts (2 Corinthians 9:2) of those who hear them proclaim the unsearchable riches of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 3:8).

While enthusiasm cannot be written on paper (or a computer screen), organization can be committed to printed form. Frankly, the mechanics of outlining a sermon are so simple that it is almost no more difficult to write a good sermon than to fill in the blanks! Every line of a sermon outline should be a full sentence; abbreviated statements do little to convey the intended thoughts maybe to the presenter and certainly to anyone else to whom the outline may be given. In addition, one can flesh out his thoughts more fully in full sentences in his outlines, and he can practice word choice and good grammar in full sentences in outlines. One need not say the exact words in his sermon outline when making the presentation (either by reading the manuscript or memorizing it, neither of which make for

effective presentations), but every preacher and teacher of God's Word needs to be familiar with the lesson material and have a plan on how to best present it. Often, full sentence outlines provide for extended opportunities for teaching by giving the notes to others as handouts, or the outlines provide the basis of written articles or books or radio or TV sermons at some future time. Don't re-invent the wheel, but build in the future on past studies; don't merely open canned goods (previous sermons, etc.) in the future and warm up what one used in the past, but use the past efforts as a foundation for building new sermons, Bible studies and articles.

Following is the outline that I use tenaciously. In addition, for ten years, I taught students in a school of preaching to mold their sermons after this pattern. See if the following template doesn't prove useful for you, and amount to filling in the blanks with your Bible study on a particular topic or passage of Scripture.

**Title:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Text:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Thesis:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Song:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Introduction:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_.
2. \_\_\_\_\_.
3. \_\_\_\_\_.

**Body:**

- I.** \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. \_\_\_\_\_.
1. \_\_\_\_\_.
  2. \_\_\_\_\_.
- B. \_\_\_\_\_.
1. \_\_\_\_\_.
  2. \_\_\_\_\_.
- II.** \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. \_\_\_\_\_.
1. \_\_\_\_\_.
  2. \_\_\_\_\_.
- B. \_\_\_\_\_.
1. \_\_\_\_\_.
  2. \_\_\_\_\_.
- III.** \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. \_\_\_\_\_.
1. \_\_\_\_\_.
  2. \_\_\_\_\_.
- B. \_\_\_\_\_.
1. \_\_\_\_\_.
  2. \_\_\_\_\_.

**Conclusion:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_.
2. \_\_\_\_\_.
3. \_\_\_\_\_.

## Invitation:

1. \_\_\_\_\_.
2. \_\_\_\_\_.
3. \_\_\_\_\_.

A symmetrically balanced outline is not lopsided in any area as opposed to some other area of the outline; for instance, if there is a sub point “one”, there is at least a sub point “two” also. In addition, one section of an outline will not have numerous sub points while another section of the outline has no or few sub points. Pretend to build an airplane, and consequently balance it so that it can fly.

Every statement throughout the outline should almost demand what the next statement will be; going back to the airplane illustration, one ought to be able to glide from one point to the next point throughout the outline. Alternatively, to use another illustration, imagine the difference between driving a car with an automatic transmission versus an automobile with a standard transmission. No one wants a jerky ride, and likewise, one’s presentation should be smooth from point to point automatically and naturally, not jerky and awkward.

Every sermon needs an invitation. The invitation to the first recorded Gospel sermon appears in Acts 2:38. A sermon needs to call listeners to action (e.g., to save one’s soul or apply some part of God’s Word to one’s life). Going back to the concept of smooth transition, the first point under the invitation should provide for a smooth transition or bridge from the sermon to the invitation. There is no need and no benefit to divorce the sermon from its invitation. Use some prominent principle from the sermon to introduce the thoughts in the invitation. Then, tell non-Christians how to be saved, and tell erring Christians, likewise, how to be saved (Mark 16:16; 1 John 1:9).

Organization isn’t everything to a sermon or Bible study or some other public presentation, but organization is a crucial part of the mechanics of public speaking, including preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Successful communication of God’s Word to one’s fellow men is the reason for which one preaches, and that is more likely to occur when proper organizational skills are used. Fill in the blanks and preach a good Gospel sermon, everywhere and at all times (2 Timothy 4:2).

## Word Choice

Words are the primary vehicle of communication, especially for preaching. “How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? ... So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:14, 17). It is clear, though, that preaching involves more than simply reading Scripture; Philip’s explanation of Isaiah 53 to the Ethiopian treasurer obviously included words beyond reading Scripture, forasmuch as he evidently taught the treasurer about baptism (Acts 8:30-36). We must, therefore, choose carefully the uninspired words that we combine with the inspired Word of God as we preach and teach one another. Following are some suggestions concerning the mechanics of preaching, especially as it pertains to the choice of words for communicating the Word of God to our fellow man.

**First, choose language that is befitting the mention of God or holy things in the same breath.** Certainly, there is a way of expressing oneself in words that is vulgar and profane under any circumstances, the type of language that ought to never roll off of the tongue of a child of God (Ephesians 4:29; Colossians 3:8). Yet, other profane language is not dignified enough to be associated with conveying God’s Word (e.g., slang or flippant references to God or holy things). Almighty God and His inspired Word deserve reverential treatment (Hebrews 12:28). “God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him” (Psalm 89:7).

**Second, choose language that does not run the risk of relegating the Word of God to a level on par with fairy-tales and myth.** For instance, avoid using the word “story” to describe events in the Word of God (e.g., Bible stories, the story of the great flood, etc.), because though the word “story” can mean “narrative,” “account” or “chronicle,” the word “story” can also mean “fairy-tale,” “yarn,” “tale” and “legend.” We should make word choices that do not run the risk of leading the hearers to associate the Word of God (or something within it) with the same category of literature from which we may have learned about Santa Claus, Little Red Riding Hood, the tortoise and the hare, the three pigs or Aesop’s Fables. Some uninspired stories may teach admirable lessons and illustrate moral truths that we need to learn, but they cannot compare to the inspired Word of God.

**Third, avoid punctuating preaching with words like “I think” or “I believe.”** What any of us think or believe is inconsequential compared to what God through the inspired Word of God communicated to us. We need to tell those before whom we stand spouting the Word of God what God thinks through what He has caused to be recorded in the Bible for mankind to embrace and practice. Emphasize, rather, book, chapter and verse or the occasions of “thus saith the Lord” that appear upon the pages of inspiration. “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 4:11).

**Fourth, choose words that best express the divine message with clarity and brevity.** Especially radio or television speakers and writers constricted by meager space limitations must make every word count, avoiding unnecessary words that do not add to but rather detract from the process of successful communication. The type of self-discipline a radio or television speaker or a writer limited to a maximum number of words must adopt would enhance the preparation and presentation of sermons and teaching lessons, too. Choose declarative statements that are calculated to have the greatest impact on the comprehension of one’s auditors; avoid the frequent use of passive sentences and contractions.

**Fifth, the use of descriptive language can clarify the words with which sermons convey God’s message.** Short of being unnecessarily wordy, a few carefully selected modifiers can enrich the transmission of a message by making it more interesting and painting word pictures (e.g., adjectives modify nouns and adverbs modify verbs). In addition, modifiers can concisely refine the definition of words. For instance, any of the adjectives “salt,” “stagnant,” “fresh,” “deep,” etc. before the noun “water” define water in a way and briefly that without a modifier (or more wordy descriptions) is not possible.

Words are the building blocks of communication from one person to another (as well as from God to mankind through the Bible). A careful selection of the words with which one conveys God’s message to his fellow man contributes to comprehension. Comprehension or understanding must precede application of God’s Word to one’s life. Life eternal for any of us depends upon implementing the Word of God in one’s life. “He that is of God heareth God’s words...” (John 8:47). “...It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). “Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).