

Homiletics: The Basics

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Introductory Overview

Preaching is actually the final product of a lot of time that has been invested into the thinking, praying, researching and strategizing by the speaker. Having spent much time in secret with the master and possibly drafted the sermon, the preacher eventually delivers within a far shorter time compared to the time they spent in gathering and organizing materials. Most of us enjoy good and well presented sermons, especially if they meet our spiritual dietary needs.

However, there is much that is taken into consideration when one selects a text, exegetes and then presents it. Part of the “*behind the scenes*” activities and the actual delivery of the sermon is the sum substance of this paper before us. We explore what goes into preparation, types of sermons and the trends towards that end. To aid us with our quest, we synthesize several helpful sources (in addition to our own thoughts) dealing with the subject of homiletics, one of them by the venerable Dr Edward Watke among others.

To kick start this discussion or presentation, it would be prudent for us to state first things first before delving into the details. This also helps us to be on the same page as we make landmark statements along the way.

The first question that begs answering is the very definition of “*Homiletics*”, what exactly is homiletics and what does it involve? Simply stated, homiletics has to do with the whole process of preparing and delivering a message, for our purpose, a sermon perhaps. This involves collecting, analyzing, sifting and orderly organizing the materials for presentation to a given audience in a particular time frame. Nearly all preachers undertake some form of hind preparation before they can speak unless exceptional extenuating circumstances dictate an impromptu speech. In ordinary circumstances, they may write the full text or just jot down main points often arranged in a preferred order and organization. More than that, the preacher must use appropriately accurate words, tone and posture as they deliver the message aiming at evoking a particular desired response. Thus, the preacher often aims to communicate one or two points to their audience and will ensure they succeed in doing so. George Whitefield once remarked that the preachers’ aim is to make their audience turn

words into pictures, ears into eyes, as it were. Another has stated that he is the best preacher that can make children grasp their sermon in totality. In short, we may state that homiletics is more than just mere preparation but also how effectively this message is communicated across to whoever is in the sermon's path.

Sermon Preparation Process

In the process of preparing a sermon, the preacher must be in the correct frame of mind. They must sharpen their minds, tune their hearts, read up and let what they digest simmer in their system before they proceed to write. Charles Bridges (1997) adds the habit of meditation (p 208) to the sermon preparation process, in addition to special prayer as a person composes a sermon. The text must be clear as ideas, thoughts, suggestion and appropriate nuggets come to crystallize in the mind while the presenter gears up for preaching. Spurgeon would say that if we are to preach, we must position our minds to effectively preach, doctrinally and potently by the power of the Holy Spirit. We carry an important message from the King. Both in speaking to his students and addresses the ministers, Spurgeon made much of the inner quality of the preacher knowing that they spoke on behalf of the master. In order to prepare the sermon, several strands must come together to enhance effective preparation. Among these would include the following:

1. Know the topic or theme you intend to speak to. This is very critical as the Lord lays it upon your heart. Be mindful of the Spiritual needs, unless a text has been given to you to expound. Otherwise, if possible, know or select a text commencing to wrap your mind around it. This is probably one of the toughest parts. C.H. Spurgeon at times would wrestle and struggle finding a text, at times finding one just a few hours before pulpit time, almost going into impromptu spontaneous delivery! The beauty about his, is that he kept reading, and reading, and reading right across the week! Whether he was preaching or not, the man would be at his books, busy "data mining"! His was a fertile curious mind from his youth. Ministers must be men of books, much like Paul was (I Tim 2:15; II Tim 4:12)! We must be both socially and spiritually intelligent! This demands much work.
2. The Bible must be the centre of all that we read or intend to talk about. Have a good translation, bible interpretation aids such as commentaries, lexicons, concordances etc. that would help exegete and interpret the text better. In my experience, it is best to have the sermon outline or structure before reverting to the tools to help us. In other words, select a text and wrestle with it before reverting to helps. In my view, it is an error to run to the external sources before delving into the scriptural mine first. That said, garner all the materials that you will need to prepare the sermon.

3. Having wrestled with the text, continue thinking through, meditating and chewing the spiritual curd of the word. To facilitate this, I would recommend putting your sermon outline aside to allow for the text simmer, yea, percolate into your entire system.
4. Revisit your sermon a day or so later to see if any of your thoughts or ideas have changed. At some point, fine tune your sermon, its structure, points, illustration etc. This is helpful along the way. Ryle (1990), regarded illustrations as windows to a sermon, throwing light upon the subject matter.
5. Again, read widely on the subject matter at hand. It would be a good idea to have a wide collection of other sound writers, academic and devotional writings. This is where commentaries and other helps come in just to counter check or compare notes with the ancient divines.
6. We would recommend sometime between your preaching and preparation because if you rise from your study straight to the pulpit, chances are that the materials have not nicely integrated into your system.
7. Last, pray much before, during and after the preparation so that God would confirm the truth upon your heart.
8. Head out to deliver in His name.

The steps how to prepare varies from individual to individual so the steps highlighted above may not resonate to everyone but be sure to have a process towards sermon preparation. Additionally, some would insist that you write your entire sermon word for word whether you will read the text or not during delivery, a point we allude to in this write up.

Sermon outline

But what constitutes a sermon? How should our sermons be structured? Different sermons have different frames and structures. Indeed, some even appear to have no specific structure at all but successfully communicate the point to their target audience. However, as God's ministers, we must be as logical and orderly as we possibly can be because we not only speak to mortals but represent the King of Kings. A basic sermon has at least three sections namely Introduction, Main body and application or conclusion. We briefly look at each of these heads before transitioning to other aspects of sermon preparation and delivery:

1. The Introduction

The sermon preparer must organize their introduction so that it is catchy, interesting and can easily resonate with the target audience. Some start with stories while others delve straight into the subject matter having given an overview. Whichever approach utilized, the introduction must be interesting and give a bird's eye view of what is in store.

2. The main body

This is where the subject matter lies and here the sermon must have as much "meat" as it can so that we get all that the audience receives. It must be so arranged and presented in 'chewable' chunks so that the audience is not lost in the midst of details. It is advisable that definitions or key phrases and words are adequately explained in an interesting way so that the audience is kept engaged from beginning to end. That is why the introduction is key because it leads them to this. The preacher must not be long winded or boring but quickly deliver the point and then descend to the conclusion. People have different approaches, with some applying the truths to their audience as they go along while others wait until the last. Many scholars advise that the main text be written down, if possible word for word and this for a good reason- Posterity. Spurgeon was such an advocate though he scarcely looked at the paper as he preached.

3. The Conclusion/application

This is the final point of the sermon and is meant to either wrap up whatever points have been advanced in the main body ensuring the points are applied to the hearts and lives of the hearers. I have found this a very key point to press home the importance of all that I have been endeavouring to present across the past hour or so.

Types of Sermons

There are several kinds and types of sermons which can be used depending on the context and style of preacher. The three well known ones are Textual, Expository and Topical sermons. I am sure, all these three overlap if well blended and used. They point to preaching the word of God in its natural setting but the focus and concentration is what differs. Below is a brief explanation of each type of sermon:

Textual: This is the sermon that takes a passage, probably a chapter, or striking subject head and expounds the central truth, commenting on selected verses within the wider context. A preacher who takes this approach must have a wide knowledge of the Bible and be able to winsomely collate all the scriptures to bear on that passage. CH Spurgeon was a champion of this style.

Expository: Expository preaching takes many forms but one of the finest and best known styles is the verse by verse expository preaching. This approach is usually a consecutive type of sermon preaching in a given book, say a doctrinal one from the first verse right through to the end of the book. For instance, I have been preaching from I Thessalonians for the past four years, verse by verse (2007-2012). This approach demands a lot of wide reading, mastering the book and line of thought of the writer in addition to the background information collation. Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones stands as a star in that regard. But expository preaching takes other forms but in each case, sense and meaning is given to the text at hand. That is why mastering an original biblical language like Greek is essential. Being an excellent exegete and expositor demands a good vocabulary and thesaurus as well.

Topical: Topical sermon draws all the related verses from right across scriptures into one concentrated treatment of the subject. It is usually independent of any given text though alludes to the sense and meaning of several passages. The sermon could centre on the subject of “*Sanctification*” or “*Holiness*” for instance and trace all the verses in the Bible which talk about or mention the subject matter as used in different senses across scripture. Many theologians prefer this approach because it gives a sense of assurance and proof for their assertions. J.C. Ryle was an expert at this kind of sermon.

Having constructed the sermon, the preacher must internalise what they have on the plate, arrange all the relevant verses and source (acknowledging where it is due, lest you be charged with plagiarism). The icing on the cake is the use appropriate illustrations which will appear like “windows” to the sermon throwing more light on the message (Ryle 1990).

Armed with such tools, the preacher is now ready to deliver the sermon, all the while entirely trusting and relying on the Lord to make the message sensible and effectual. If God does not bless, all the fine words will be but mere powerless rhetoric which ends as soon as the assembly disbands. But if God anoints the message, honouring its faithful delivery, the message will achieve its intended purpose and aim. In all they do, the preachers are mere heralds and prophets of the Lord not there to push their own ego, agenda or self esteem.

The Preacher Himself

The preacher must be ready for the task and ensure they have the correct and appropriate disposition. There are a number of traits that Dr Watke (1994) has suggested which include, being regenerate and assured, possessing a working knowledge of the word of God, consistency in prayer, patience avoiding greed etc. He also warns against what he terms “Perils” such as inconsistent living which may “unpreach” what the herald preaches at Church. A reading of Charles

Bridges' *The Christian Ministry* does much good to the Ministers'¹ soul (Bridges 1959).

The Preaching process (A snap shot)

Finally, we come to a consideration of the subject of preaching. Although we have already alluded to this fact already, it is no trouble to look at it again. Runia (1978) takes a detailed approach as he analyses and traces preaching throughout the ages. He ably demonstrates that public preaching has been the primary means God has used over the centuries whether it was the prophets or any other. He explains what "Prophesying" means and in what senses it may be used and has been. A prophet may be one that foretells or forth tells. In either case, God's word is declared and communicated. While the one may talk about things yet to come and unwritten, the latter simply expounds or brings to light afresh what God has already made known. The forth teller is often logical, well organised and aims to communicate a particular truth, whether it is a rebuke, correction or simply an encouragement. Good old Perkins (1996) did an excellent job on this subject as did Richard Baxter (2013). In a post modern context however, the effectiveness of the traditional method of preaching, where one stands on a podium and exercises their diaphragm, at times speaking loudly is questioned and viewed as ineffective. People are therefore devising new ways to communicate the gospel and in the process compromising a lot of issues. Others say today's audiences are too busy and cannot endure long protracted theological discourses. They have thus compromised on the content and length of preaching replacing it with entertainment such as music and acting on stage. Runia (1978), none the less successfully demonstrates both from the scriptures and from historical facts (e.g. the Heldeberg Catechism) that public apostolic preaching has been the way and will remain the primary mode for a long time to come, though some modifications may be essential here and there.

The best about all these writers we have cited above is that they demonstrate and excellent mastery of Koine Greek (for New Testament for example or Septuagint) and prove that only what God wants is to be delivered to His people should. May the Lord help us so to do.

Take home Lessons

Several lessons can be hewn from this brief discourse on Homiletics. Basically, the subject matter revolves around sermon preparation and delivery. In this

¹ I use the phrase "*Minister*" in this discourse in a generic sense no necessarily in the sense Spurgeon would have used it. Any Christian is a Minister of the Gospel in whatever sphere of life including when asked to preach a message in the standard Church pulpit.

paper, we have focused on the preparation and to a lesser degree the delivery. We have however not dealt with the dynamics during the preaching itself. That is subject for another day. The ensuing take home points are handy:

1. Homiletics is a hard but necessary work.
2. It has to do with sermon preparation and delivery.
3. So many dynamics take place when a person is to preach both before during and after.
4. Preaching is serious business and must be taken as such.
5. The mode of delivery may differ depending on the target group and context.
6. The content should be as Biblical as possible.
7. Before a sermon is prepared, the text and them must be clear.
8. Sermon structure often has three parts: Introduction, main body and application.
9. The Application is a necessary aspect of the sermon not merely conclusion of what has been discussed. The preacher applies the truths to the present day hearers. The message must come to bear on the hearts and minds of hearers.
10. To be a great exegete and interpreter of scripture, it is encouraged to know at least one of the original languages although not mandatory. Tools exist to help the preacher in their interpretation of scripture.
11. Helps outside the scriptures must be consulted after an individual has first wrestled with the text. Far too many rush to commentaries, lexicons etc. before they internalise the sermon.
12. Sermon preparation must begin early to avoid panic and half-baked sermons.
13. The preacher must know which type of sermon they wish to deliver whether topical, expository or textual, evangelistic, doctrinal etc. This helps to clarify stuff.

Conclusion

Sermon preparation is hard work demanding serious attention of the preacher. The sermon preparer does well to start early as well as read widely so as to be

competent people who rightly divide the word of Truth (I Tim 2:15). May God grant excellent preachers in the midst of the years Amen!

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