

Principles of a good preaching address

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Preaching should involve truth, clarity and passion. The understanding of the audience should be taken into account. The method and format of presentation should not overtake the message. A good address will have an introduction, the essentials and a conclusion.

ANY ATTEMPT at preaching with proper effect consists of three factors:

- 1 Truth**—this has to be defined as ‘being according to God’s Word’. This is the starting point for any attempt to preach the gospel, whether it is by public address, communal discussion or by personal preaching. God’s Word is truth. Truth is the prerequisite of all attempts to express the nature of the good news we share. It is the foundation block of all preaching. It is the foundation of all belief. It is this truth that we should desire to elaborate, illuminate and enliven for every individual we have the privilege to talk to. Without truth nothing else matters. We can be as dynamic as we like, we can be as clear as crystal, but if it is not according to truth it avails nothing.
- 2 Clarity**—the truth we have been blessed to share is hindered if it is not clear. If what we say is not easy to follow and understand then the message is easily lost. Truth can be easily missed if an inundation of facts, figures, excellent-sounding words and phrases swamp it. Bible terms with which believers are familiar are often far from familiar for those with no Bible familiarity. Many Bible expressions of truth now require explanation. We need to be aware that they require explanation. Sadly, the assumption of Bible familiarity is not a safe one in the modern world. Some may know, or think they know, but many will not. Our aim should be clarity for all. While this may require what *we* deem to be simplicity, we need to remember that truth is both simple yet unfathomably deep. Depth of understanding comes with familiarity, which many of us have, but many of those to whom we preach have not. Preachers need to recognise this and be

understanding of, and helpful in, the learning process.

- 3 Passion**—enthusiasm is paramount in conveying the conviction we have of the life-changing nature of the truth we express. Passion of itself is not enough.

However, combined with a clear delivery of life-giving truth, as expressed in God’s Word, so that others can understand, passion is everything. A dry delivery of fact clearly delivered is nowhere near as convincing as the presentation of truth shown by one who is convinced by its reality. Passion, in this context, is *not* about artificial enthusiasm and is *not* about effect. It is all about a positive desire to see the content of the things spoken about being received because of its life-giving potential on the individual receiving it.

The truth of these three defining factors of preaching remains wherever and however we preach, whether personally, communally or formally. The removal of any one of these factors will dramatically reduce the effectiveness of the preaching we undertake.

Before dealing with some suggestions in the construction of public addresses there are a number of issues worthy of note. Each of these will have an impact on one or more of the defining factors for effective preaching.

Your audience

Note needs to be made of the importance of understanding your audience. Knowing who is to be, or is being, spoken to, is vital in the effectiveness of an address. The presentation of the gospel can then be directed specifically at the needs of those listening, thus increasing possible acceptance. As the Apostle Paul says of his own preaching, “I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel’s sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you” (1 Cor. 9:22,23). The preaching of the apostles is testimony to their understanding of their audiences. Peter’s challenging tones

to the men of Israel (Acts 2) differ substantially from Paul's reasoning with the Athenians (Acts 17)—two different presentations to two separate audiences with one vital message.

Preaching addresses should always have as their main function the sharing of the gospel with those who do not yet believe. Whilst benefit can undoubtedly be gained by believers present, the focus should firmly be on those who do not yet believe. Simply put, don't speak to believers when you're preaching, talk to those who are on the path to understanding truth; lead *them* to understand the gospel and its implications.

Presentation

The golden rule with any presentation is, do not allow the presentation to overtake the message. The three basic factors of truth, clarity and passion should be borne in mind.

- **Visual aids** can be particularly powerful in assisting the message, but only if used well. A visual aid used badly is worse than no visual aid. Jesus often used everyday people and objects to form the basis of memorable 'presentations' ending in powerful lessons: the widow casting in two mites; the fowls of the air; the lilies of the field—the examples in the ministry of Jesus abound. A large proportion of information absorbed by the human brain is by visual means. Visual aids, then, can helpfully assist the transmission of truth but should never be substituted for it. They should aim to increase the clarity of the truth of what is said rather than overtake it.
- **Anecdotes and stories** can form powerful springboards for spiritual lessons. The danger with these is that the hearer remembers the story and not the message—'Nice story, what was the point again?' Jesus used stories to create a memorable effect on the hearer. However, whereas Jesus' parables were specifically designed to shield meaning from those who were "dull of hearing", few if any presenters of truth now set out deliberately to obscure their message.
- **Communication techniques:** a clear, confident voice, good posture, eye contact, gesticulation and movement all assist in convincing an audience that you are interested in what you are saying *and* that you are interested in them hearing and knowing. This is about passion for the message. Good preparation and well-prepared material can be killed by body-language that shouts, "I'm actually a bit

bored by having to tell you this". On the other hand, excessive use of these can distract and detract, so speaker beware.

Effective public addresses

Public addresses are no different in the requirements of truth, clarity and passion from any other form of preaching. However, public addresses have one distinct advantage over many other forms of preaching in that they can often be considered beforehand. Personal preaching opportunities often present themselves spontaneously and unexpectedly, and can be taken or lost in equal measure. The organised opportunity presented in a public address to make known the gospel brings with it a level of additional responsibility. It should never be taken lightly simply because of its regularity; it should be undertaken with both humility and prayer.

Constructing public addresses

The following structure for the construction of a good public address is suggested as being potentially helpful. Public addresses can be enhanced by having the following structure in mind:

- an introduction
- the essentials
- a conclusion.

Encapsulating these three points, the teaching maxim is helpful: "Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you have told them". In short, have a beginning, middle and end—and let your audience know which is where. This sounds straightforward, but is often harder to achieve than it seems without proper planning. Each of these sections is now dealt with in turn.

Introduction

It may seem obvious to say it, but the purpose of an introduction is to introduce. No more, no less. It should serve to introduce the theme, the subject or the topic. An introduction should allow the subject to be dealt with in general terms before it is addressed particularly.

Ironically, the introduction is usually best prepared last. This is so that the thoughts that have been constructed can be drawn together, and describe, as succinctly as possible, in anticipation, the ideas that will be presented in greater depth later. Adopt the thought, "whet the appetite for more to come".

The introduction to the Gospel of Luke (1:1-4) is a striking example of a good introduction.

Many have suggested it was written after the rest of the Gospel to epitomise its content. It draws the reader into its content and expression of truth. It characterises a good introduction in that it is simple, pertinent and courteous. Luke's example illustrates that a good introduction gives opportunity to overcome obstacles:

- of prejudice, that the listener might be brought face to face with the message
- of ignorance, that the listener might understand the message.

Paul, too, provides us with an example of how an effective introduction can pave the way for the gospel to be preached: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious" (Acts 17:22, ESV). Whilst not eulogising them, he uses their own interest in all things religious to grasp their attention and put before them a topic of potential interest. By these carefully chosen words and those that follow (v. 23) he removes possible barriers. The effect of this introduction is that he, a Jew, was able to share the gospel with a very different audience: learned Greeks.

The essentials

The main part of any address should be the hardest to formulate, and is the nuts and bolts. It requires effort, work, toil and sweat.

The most important starting point is prayer. There should be acknowledgement that God is our motivation in preparing what we say. Preparing addresses is not about self or kudos in 'being a speaker'. It needs to be undertaken in the spirit of desiring to serve and to make God's Name known. Beginning with, and continuing in, prayer in our preparations, will be a reminder that we are proclaiming God's Name and His wonderful works and not preparing a performance.

The second part of the preparation work is based in reading God's Word. Reading and thinking about it, reading other writers on the subject, with discernment, then thinking and reading God's Word again, and thinking some more. This basis in the Word of God should be

clear in the presentation. The better a speaker's own understanding of the subject, the better able he will be to elucidate for the benefit of others.

The end of this preparation should be that 'the essentials' should develop and draw out a theme that makes for spiritual growth, at whatever level an audience is at. In order for the message to be well understood the material should be ordered and progressive. It should move forward in an understandable way, explaining Scripture first, in context both of its setting and, secondly, of its relevance and impact on the listener.

Conclusion

Finally, the purpose of a conclusion is to conclude; again, this is obvious stuff but needs stating. The conclusion is where the address is brought to an end. First, in order to conclude well it must *include*; it should bring together cogently, carefully and neatly the salient elements propounded in the address: tell them what you have told them. Secondly, in order to conclude properly it must *preclude*; new ideas or new thoughts should be absent from a conclusion.

Perhaps most importantly, any conclusion to a preaching address should make a spiritual and moral appeal on the listener at the same time as precluding the possibility of rejection. A fine Biblical example of concluding with impact is the prophet Nathan's parable to David of the two men, rich and poor, the one with many flocks and the other with one lamb. The words carried David along, absorbing him in the story. Nathan's concluding message was a knockout blow that could not be avoided: "Thou art the man" (2 Sam. 12:7).

Final summary

An effective public address should:

- be carefully and prayerfully prepared
- have beginning, middle and end
- be presented clearly with a passion for the truth put forward.

Quote from an Australian newspaper in 1897: The Rev. Robert Roberts, a Christadelphian preacher from Birmingham, addressed a considerable audience in the Athenaeum Hall . . . Mr. Roberts is a man of short stature, whose prime has passed, but not his vigour. His uppermost attributes as a preacher, are, his dead earnestness, his disregard for dramatic phrasemaking, and lightning rapidity of utterance. His posturing is unconventional but plentiful. In the opening, he seemed to be suffering from a bad attack of ennui; within a few moments he was hurling reason at his audience with a sling shot.

Robert Roberts, *Diary of a Second Voyage to Australia*, p. 57