

# HOW TO WRITE A SERMON: A TEMPLATE

by Bob Thune, June 2016

How do I get from text to sermon? This is *the* question in sermon preparation. For more experienced preachers, the sermon-writing process often becomes intuitive and non-linear. But for beginning preachers, a step-by-step approach is helpful. So I offer this template as a guide.

All the great teachers of preaching focus on two basic disciplines: exegesis and homiletics. **EXEGESIS** seeks an accurate understanding and interpretation of the biblical text as received by the original audience; **HOMILETICS** seeks to craft an orderly, coherent, and compelling sermon for delivery.

In order to ensure Christ-centered preaching, I suggest adding *gospel-centrality* as a third and distinct discipline. **GOSPEL-CENTRALITY** seeks to anchor the text within the broader canon of Scripture, connect the sermon to God's redeeming grace, and ensure faith in the good news as the means of transformation.

## STEP 1: EXEGESIS

**Commune with God.** Enjoy personal communion with God through Bible reading and prayer. Otherwise, preaching prep becomes toilsome instead of worshipful.

**Identify the Genre.** Prophecy is not the same as poetry. "Every novel is a book - but not every book is a novel." Know the genre, and know the rules for reading each biblical genre well.

**Break Down the Text.** Study it. Analyze its structure. Get down into its words and phrases. Identify its key sections and themes. Outline the text to ensure that your sermon is faithful to the intent of the original author.

**Summarize the Big Idea.** Ask: what is this passage *about*? Then ask: what is it *saying* about that topic? Bring these 2 answers together to summarize the exegetical main point or *big idea* of the text in one sentence.

**Identify the Redemptive Need (FCF).** Ask: what condition do modern hearers share with the original audience that requires the grace of this passage? How, in this text, is God addressing our:

Fallen Condition (our inner tendency toward temptation & evil)

Finite Condition (the limits of our knowledge, emotional capacity, & physical ability)

Fragile Condition (the effects of living in a fallen world)

Faltering Condition (the inconsistency between what I profess & what I embody)

**Identify the Worship Themes.** The goal of preaching is worship. So, how is God after our glad-hearted worship in this text? What does he reveal about himself, about us, or about redemption that should move us to worship and adoration?

## STEP 2: GOSPEL-CENTRALITY

What does it mean to preach a "gospel-centered" sermon? It means to relate every text to 1) our human need for redemption and 2) God's provision of redemption through Jesus.

Here are some ways of doing this:

**God as a Redeeming God:** In texts that don't explicitly mention Jesus, how is God revealing his plan, his purposes, and/or his reasons for redemption? How is God the hero of the story?

**Ministry of Jesus:** How does this text **predict, prepare for, reflect, or result from** the ministry of Jesus? Is there an obvious connection to Jesus' person and work in the text?

**Indicative/Imperative:** What commands (imperatives) are given in the text? What keeps us from obeying those commands (be specific and nuanced here, not general)? How has Jesus obeyed in our place AND set us free from our sin & disobedience? How does resting in his work (indicative) & walking in the Holy Spirit enable us now to obey these commands with joy?

**Resurrection Joy & Power:** The gospel includes not only the crucifixion, but the resurrection & ascension. How does Jesus' victory over Satan, sin, and death – and his sending of the Holy Spirit – bring the joy and power we need to live as his faithful people?

**Jesus as Satisfaction:** What core human need does the text raise? How can I get the audience to FEEL that need, and then show how Jesus satisfies it?

**Greatness of Christ:** How does this text reveal the wonder & excellence of Jesus? How can I help my hearers experience the greatness of Christ so that they are changed on the spot and moved to worship?

A gospel-centered sermon should **expound** Christ (tell about him), **adore** Christ (show why he is worthy of love, allegiance, worship), and **apply** Christ (show people how their problems result from idolatry and unbelief, and how worship is the answer).

*The biggest mistake novice preachers make is to reduce the gospel to “justification by grace through faith.” The gospel is not less than that; but it is much more than that. Bryan Chapell is helpful: “So long as the preacher explains ways in which God uses a text to reveal his own plan, purposes, and/or reasons for redemption, the sermon leads listeners away from human-centered religiosity... God [must be] the hero of every text.”*

## STEP 3: HOMILETICS

**Answer the “So What?” Question.** Imagine a skeptic sitting in the audience and asking, “So what? What difference does this make?” A clear answer to that question is the key to a powerful sermon.

**Establish a Thesis for the Sermon.** There are two ways to go about this.

State the thesis as a proposition, containing a subject and a predicate. The best propositions “implicate the hearer” (that is, they demand a response): “Here’s **what is true**; therefore, here’s **what we must do**.” For example: “Because Jesus is Lord, we must obey him.”

State the thesis as a memorable catch-phrase that has “sticking power.” For example: “Dead people don’t choose.”

**Identify Defeater Beliefs.** What might keep people from embracing this biblical truth? Are there cultural assumptions I need to confront? Are there existential questions I need to address? Are there confusing statements in the passage that I need to unpack?

**Create a Preaching Outline.** Start with a broad skeleton: an introduction that states the thesis, 2 or 3 main points that support the thesis, and a conclusion. Then add content under each point to fill out the outline. Always keep your audience in mind here. What will help them most? What do they **need** in order to be convinced of your thesis? What needs to be left out?

**Add Color.** What illustrations, stories, or personal self-disclosure would make each point more memorable? How could I use humor to further the goal of this sermon?

**Rethink Your Application.** Go back to the “so what” question. Why are you preaching this? What does the Holy Spirit want us to **think/feel/do** as a result? Application is not a **part of** your sermon; it **is** your sermon. So: Does your sermon challenge the **mind** (lie vs. truth)? Does it provoke the **heart** (unbelief vs. belief)? Does it move **hands** to action (disobedience vs. faithful obedience)? (Some sermons tap all 3 of these categories; others focus primarily on one).

**Cut Some Stuff.** Less is more. Dr. Richard Pratt says: “You can’t say everything every time you say something, or you’ll say nothing anytime you say anything.”

**Signpost.** As you transition from one point to the next, make clear statements of transition. These can be as obvious as: “That’s point one; moving on now to point 2...” The listening ear needs to know when to mentally shift from one part of the sermon to the next.

**Remember the Three Keys to a Good Sermon.** Will Walker suggests that every memorable sermon leverages three key elements:

**Tension** (you pulled me in and kept my interest); this generally belongs in the introduction, because tension seeks resolution and therefore creates anticipation.

**Insight** (you helped me see something I hadn’t seen before); this generally belongs in the body of the sermon, showing how the text helps explain or resolve the tension.

**Emotion** (you made me feel something); this generally belongs in the illustrations & application within each main point, causing the audience to think/feel/do something in the moment.