

SUGGESTIONS FOR POWERFUL PREACHING

By Bob Young

Many preachers misunderstand **the purpose of preaching**. Two extremes illustrate the challenge. Some are so “text-focused” that the sermon is little more than a monologue Bible class. The sermon focuses on the message of the text to help people understand God’s Word. Others are so “life-focused” that the sermon is little more than a pep talk. The sermon focuses on the meaning or application of the text to help people live out God’s Word. Ideally, the sermon integrates message and meaning.

Biblical preaching begins with the text. The sermon is a bridge that moves from the text to the world. The life settings and needs of the congregation may be analyzed, but the first task in preaching is to identify the correspondence between the biblical text and life, to bring the Word of God to bear on the situation of the hearers. Saying that biblical preaching begins with the text also says that the foundation of the biblical sermon is not the extremely good illustration or excellent sermon the preacher heard and wants to share.

Biblical preaching recognizes the power of the Word of God and is committed to presenting the whole counsel of God. There is a value in helping the local church hear the message and make application in ways parallel to how the early church heard the message and made application. In fact, some homelitericians have suggested that the hearers are quite capable of making personal applications if the message is well-presented.

Biblical preaching aims to alter the thinking, attitudes, and actions of the hearers. Biblical preaching aims to lead listeners to spiritual maturity. Biblical preaching motivates personal ministry and mission. I easily recognize powerful preaching because it makes me want to be more like Jesus, and it shows me how to do it!

Biblical preaching not only begins with a biblical text. **Biblical preaching begins with a well-defined biblical purpose.** If the preacher does not know what is to be accomplished in the sermon, it is almost certain that the congregation will not identify the purpose and will not know how to respond. Rick Warren has written that preaching without application is a major problem with today’s preaching. How often does the preacher not know what he wants to happen as a result of the sermon? Consider a short list of possibilities: the sermon may be designed to (1) motivate or actuate, (2) inspire, (3) exhort or encourage, (4) inform (teach), (5) explain, (6) provide biblical advice for specific needs or problems, (7) provide “how to....” steps, (8) clarify, (9) correct, or (10) convince. This list is expanded in many preaching textbooks.

I conclude with specific suggestions for powerful preaching.

(1) **To reemphasize: begin with a purpose statement.** As just explained, clearly define a specific purpose and the response the listener is expected to make. The entire sermon should continually call attention to the aim. The sermon is like a bullet. The sermon is not a shell filled with pellets to be sprayed into the air randomly hoping some desirable target will be hit.

(2) **Develop the body of the sermon: connect each point with the purpose.** Perhaps the points of the sermon are specific applications or life changes. The points should “flesh out” or give details about the purpose. One way to help your hearers put the sermon into practice is to word the points with action verbs (not simply “be”). Make certain that the action steps are possible for the hearers. The sermon must be practical; it must suggest results that are out of reach.

(3) **Use effective illustrations that connect to the desired response or actions.** Be specific; explain how others have heard and applied the teaching in their lives. Motivation involves helping your hearers understand how to respond, what are the next steps, and what are the anticipated results.

A second matter related to illustrations is to be cautious about using illustrations from your own life. Better to say “I know about a person who....” than to make yourself the hero of your illustration. At the same time, the preacher must be an effective model of the actions or responses the sermon is designed to motivate.

(4) **Ask questions: learn the value of inductive learning.** Effective preaching is not always “telling.” Often the most effective preaching guides the listeners to see truth, understand the message, and make their own applications. Inductive preaching requires that the speaker learn how to ask good questions. Questions can effectively conclude each point of the sermon. Questions are an excellent way to conclude the sermon, calling attention to the specific applications that have been suggested.

(5) **The invitation is not an “add-on.”** Effective invitations grow out of the sermon. The “action steps” – meaning or application -- correspond to the message. Do not preach about one thing and ask people to do something else in the invitation.

Invitations are most effective when they guide and reflect the life and values of the church. If people are asked to raise their hands to commit to a certain action, they should later be asked about the completion of the task. “Last Sunday, over 50 committed to daily prayer for the lost; some probably committed without raising their hands. How many were able to pray daily for the lost?” Changed lives are obvious when listeners see that their hearts and lives are being changed so that they are doing what the Bible says.

Do not forget that Jesus is the center of the sermon. The sermon must never center around the hearers, the local church, or specific situations. The Bible is God’s revelation of himself. The biblical sermon will reveal God. The biblical sermon will focus on Jesus as the one who came to show us God. Jesus is the message.