

TEN STEPS TO BETTER SERMONS

STATE IT – AIM IT – FRAME IT

By David Christensen



www.rephidimproject.org

STEP #1: PICK A UNIT OF THOUGHT.

The first step in expository preaching is to segment the Bible book into sections. Each segment should be a complete unit of thought. Expository preaching is not so much verse by verse preaching as it is unit of thought preaching. Compare the paragraphing of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament with several English translations to determine the units of thought based on the decisions of the editors. The goal is to segment the larger passage of Scripture into units of thought. Verse by verse exposition often loses the author's main idea in the details of the text. Effective exposition strives to expose the original author's units of thought so that people can think through the passage as the biblical author intended. Each unit of thought becomes the foundation for the sermon.

STEP #2: DISTINGUISH THE BIG IDEAS FROM THE LITTLE IDEAS.

The Bible is full of ideas. There are big ideas and little ideas. Many preachers get caught up in all the little ideas and neglect the big ideas of the Bible. Every passage has many little ideas in it. Much preaching focuses on the little ideas and our listeners go away with lots of good thoughts but no eternal truths for life. How do we preach the big ideas in a passage? The key is "context." The word "context" comes from two Latin words meaning "woven together" so we are speaking of a connection of thought that is woven together in our passage as it relates to the biblical context. The little ideas are interrelated, and we weave them together to preach the big ideas. We weave the little ideas into big ideas as we see the purpose and plan for the whole Bible. The gospel is the big idea of the Bible, so our preaching must always be Gospel-centered. The gospel is more than a message on how to be saved. The gospel is the good news of the kingdom of God. Christ is the king of His kingdom, and Christ saves us for His kingdom. The gospel of the kingdom is the full orb ed gospel which is the big idea of the Bible. Gospel-centered preaching is grace-centered preaching. Gospel-centered preaching is Christ-centered preaching. Our preaching must relate the little ideas in our passage to the big idea of the gospel of His kingdom.

STEP #3: LAY OUT THE STRUCTURE OF YOUR PASSAGE.

A structural diagram of a unit of thought traces the arrangement of the passage by following various structural clues. The objective is to see the passage and then trace in visual form the grammatical relationships of the clauses using a block diagram. A block diagram helps the expositor visualize the structure of the passage just like an electrical schematic helps an electrician visualize the wiring of a device. The expositor must distinguish between the major and minor clauses in a unit of thought which is an interpretive process that is basic to structural analysis. Enter each clause or phrase on a new line in the diagram. Decide the level of importance for each clause and move it to the right or left in the diagram based on your interpretive decision. You will often make decisions the first time through the process that will be changed later as you look more carefully at the text. Keep working with the interpretive decisions until you arrive at your schematic of the passage.

STEP #4: STATE YOUR CENTRAL IDEA IN A SIMPLE SENTENCE.

In its most elemental form, an idea (thought) consists of two parts. There is a subject, and there is a complement (predicate). Every idea must include these two elements, or it is not a complete idea. The subject answers the question, "What am I talking about?" For example, prayer is a subject. The answer is that I am talking about prayer. The complement answers the question, "What am I saying about

what I am talking about?” For example, “Prayer aligns our hearts with God’s heart.” The second clause explains the subject. All sermons should have a central idea. A central idea contains both a subject and a complement. The central idea should be stated in contemporary terms in either the first or second person but not the third person. We are preaching about how prayer aligns our hearts, not Paul’s heart.

STEP #5: AIM YOUR MESSAGE TO ACCOMPLISH YOUR PURPOSE.

The preacher becomes the bridge from the world of the Bible back then to the world of the people here and now. The preacher applies the Scripture to his life and through his life he applies it to the lives of people today. We call that incarnational preaching because the preacher fleshes out the message of the Bible. The Word of God becomes incarnate in the preacher. The Bible is the source of the ideas for the sermon, but the Bible is applied through universal principles to needs of people today. The purpose focuses on the needs of the people today. The preacher studies in the past tense but preaches in the present tense. Vision is the key. Where the needs of the passage intersect with the needs of the people, we find the purpose for the message. Specific purposes come from and are limited to a specific passage and specific people. We aim the Scriptures at people’s needs in the sermon.

STEP #6: FRAME YOUR MESSAGE WITH AN OUTLINE.

At this point in the process, we are ready to shape the material into a sermon like a sculptor shapes the clay into a figure. The material is the same, but the artistry is dependent on the skill of the artist to shape the raw material. The same thing is true with preaching. Different preachers can utilize the same material and yet one sermon is dull and the other exhilarating. The shape of the sermon is controlled by (1) the central idea (2) the purpose and (3) the outline. The main points in an outline are the bones of the sermon – the skeleton from which the muscles and flesh can hang. We will work on fleshing out the sermon later, but for now, we are mainly concerned with describing the text in outline form. We are putting the structural diagram into a memorable format.

STEP #7: IDENTIFY THE CONTEMPORARY LIFE PARALLELS.

Contemporary life parallels are the needs and experiences of the people in our audience. As the saying goes: The job of the preacher is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable! Every time we preach, there are people in our audience who need comfort. There are others who need affliction! Knowing who needs what is essential for every preacher. We must know our audience to preach well. Exegeting our congregation is just as important as exegeting our text. As pastors, we look out on Sunday morning at real people with real life stories. There is the single mom with a special needs child. We see the husband whose wife passed away or the woman whose mom died last year. There is the young person wrestling with sexual temptation. Whether homosexual or heterosexual, the temptation is just as real. The family struggling with cancer is listening. The man who lost his job is there. There are skeptics and cynics jaded by the world who dare us to say something life changing for them. We see the woman struggling with the aftermath of a nasty divorce. Lonely people sit in the pews too. All of these people and many others should be in our minds as we prepare to preach. Sometimes the needs seem overwhelming, but these needs help us identify the contemporary life parallels for our sermons.

STEP #8: GATHER ILLUSTRATIONS TO APPLY THE MESSAGE.

Illustrations are powerful weapons in a preacher's arsenal, but the primary issue is the purpose. Illustrations are not an end in themselves. Illustrations must always serve a purpose. When illustrations become the master instead of the servant, they blow up the sermon. We use illustrations to make truth memorable, understandable, motivational and applicational. There are no good and bad illustrations. There are only good and bad illustrations of certain points. Trying to make an illustration fit your sermon is like trying to pound square pegs into round holes. We gather illustrations from many sources including the Bible, our own experiences, our reading, current events, the lives of our people, and illustration data bases. We should use a wide variety of illustrations to keep our sermons fresh, and we must set up an illustration properly to make the point. A nice diamond is ruined by an ugly setting. So is a nice illustration.

STEP #9: WRITE OUT YOUR CONCLUSION, SO YOU KNOW HOW TO STOP.

The conclusion is the climax of the sermon. These words are the last words that people hear so they are the most potent words in the message. A good conclusion ties the sermon together like the bow ties up the wrapping paper on an expensive gift. We should wrap up what has been said in the sermon and not introduce new material in the conclusion. Good conclusions appeal to people to change their ways without manipulating them in any way. Good conclusions are relatively short. The rule of thumb is no more than 10% of the total message. The final words of a sermon are vital for they remain ringing in your listener's ears. The last two sentences should always be written out. When we've said them, QUIT! Long-winded speakers exhaust their listeners long before they exhaust their subjects.

STEP #10: WRITE OUT YOUR INTRODUCTION, SO YOU KNOW HOW TO START.

At long last – the final step! The reason we place the introduction as the final step in the process is that only then do we know for sure exactly what we are introducing. Introductions must introduce, but too many introductions bear little connection to what follows. If we prepare the introduction last, then we will know what to introduce. Good introductions simultaneously get people's attention and awaken awareness of need. People come to church with all kinds of needs, hurts, and desires. When we touch a need, we strike a chord in the heart. A good introduction awakens a need or desire in their minds. The Holy Spirit stimulates these desires in our hearts. If we touch these kinds of needs and desires in the first few minutes, people will listen. We should try to touch a need in the introduction and then use the Word of God like a spotlight to focus on the solution for that need through the sermon.