

John Stott on Preparing Sermons

NOTE: This outline is condensed from John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), pp. 211-216.

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- See more at: <http://www.xenos.org/classes/homiletics/stotthom.htm#sthash.gQ2L1Z2V.dpuf>

I. Choose your text

A. It is best to rely on expository book studies for the steady diet of your people, because this ensures they will get "the whole counsel of God."

B. However, the following may be occasions for special sermons:

Special calendar occasions: Christmas, Easter, etc.

Special external circumstances which are in the public mind.

Special needs discerned by the preacher or others.

Truths which have specially inspired the preacher.

C. Keep a notebook to scribble down ideas for sermons, insights, burdens, illustrations, etc. Record them immediately wherever they come to mind, because you will usually forget them later.

II. Meditate on the text

A. Whenever possible, plan out texts weeks or months in advance. This gives the benefit of "subconscious incubation".

B. Concentrated "incubation" should begin at least one week before preaching. It should involve the following:

Read, re-read, and re-re-read the text.

Be sure you understand what it means. Do your own interpretive work. Don't use commentaries until you have formulated specific interpretive questions which you have been unable to answer, or until you have completed your interpretive work.

Brood longer over how it applies to your people, to the culture, to you, etc.

Pray for God to illuminate the text, especially its application.

Scribble down notes of thoughts, ideas, etc.

Solicit the insights of others through tapes, talking with other preachers, etc.

III. Isolate the dominant thought

(This is the purpose of section II.)

A. Your sermon should convey only one major message. All of the details of your sermon should be marshaled to help your people grasp that message and feel its power.

B. You should be able to express the dominant thought in one short, clear, vivid sentence.

IV. Arrange your material to serve the dominant thought

A. Chisel and shape your material. Ruthlessly discard all material which is irrelevant to the dominant thought. Subordinate the remaining material to the dominant thought by using that material to illuminate and reinforce the dominant thought.

B. Your sermon structure should be suited to the text, not artificially imposed. Avoid structure which is too clever, prominent or complex.

C. Decide on your method of preaching for this text: argumentation, faceting, categorizing, analogy, etc.

D. Carefully choose words that are precise, simple, clear, vivid and honest. Write out the key sections, phrases, and sentences to help you in your word choice. Stick to short declarative and interrogative sentences with few, if any, subordinate clauses.

E. Come up with illustrations and examples which will explain and convict. Employ a wide variety: figures of speech, images, retelling biblical stories in contemporary language, inventing fresh parables, retelling true historical and/or biographical events, etc. Keep a file of these, especially if they do not come easily to you. Avoid making illustrations and examples so prominent that they detract from the dominant thought. Also, avoid applying them inappropriately or overusing them.

V. Add the introduction and conclusion

A. The introduction should not be elaborate, but enough to arouse their curiosity, wet their appetites and introduce the dominant thought. This can be done by a variety of means: explaining the setting of the passage, story, current event or issue, etc.

B. The conclusion should not merely recapitulate your sermon--it should apply it. Obviously, you should be applying all along, but you should keep something for the end which will prevail upon your people to take action. "No summons, no sermon." Preach though the head to the heart (i.e. the will). The goal of the sermon should be to "storm the citadel of the will and capture it for Jesus Christ." What do you want them to do? Employ a variety of methods to do this:

Argument: anticipate objections and refute them

Admonition: warn of the consequences of disobedience

Indirect Conviction: arouse moral indignation and then turn it on them (Nathan with David)

Pleading: apply the gentle pressure of God's love, concern for their well-being, and the needs of others

Vision: paint a picture of what is possible through obedience to God in this area

VI. Write down and pray over your message

A. Writing out your sermon forces you to think straight and sufficiently. It exposes lazy thinking and cures it. After you are thoroughly familiar with your outline, reduce it to small notes.

B. Pray the God will enable you to "so possess the message that the message possesses you."