

Preparing to Preach

4. Identifying the Brain

The 'brain' is the crucial link between the text and the sermon. It is when we seriously begin to think about the message we are going to give and, equally important, the people to whom we will speak. This is when we make the move from *hermeneutics* to *homiletics*.

John Stott describes preaching as building a bridge between the world of the Bible text and the world of your congregation. Following our process there are two parts to the bridge.

The first part of the bridge-building is all about the biblical passage. You select the passage, study it, discern its original purpose and formulate the idea in it. That puts you half-way through the process.

The last four stages are all concerned with effective and relevant communication of the passage to your congregation. The message purpose, idea, outline and details all need to take into account who you are preaching to.

The question I need to ask at this stage is:

"On the basis of the MTh of this text, what does God want me to say to this group of people in this message?"

Or,

"What will be the main thrust of **this** sermon that will communicate the main point of **this** text to **these** people?"

Let's take an example:

Ephesians 6:

I take the MTh of this text to be something along these lines:

We need to put on the whole armour provided by God so that we can withstand the attacks of the devil.

The main thrust of the sermon may not include everything in the text or passage I am preaching from but it must be faithful to the biblical passage in terms of emphasis and content. For example, in the Ephesians 6 passage there are a number of aspects of the truth that I could concentrate on – the armour itself, the nature of the attacks of Satan. I need to determine what will be the burden of **this** message to **this** people.

So, I could decide that the purpose of my message from this passage will be either

- i. to encourage and motivate God's people to make use of God's provided armour in their battle with the devil.
- ii. to teach God's people about the ways in which Satan attacks them

Again, it is important to identify and single out one over-riding burden and truth to communicate. Congregations can't cope with or remember a whole raft of ideas and truths and if we try to cover too much ground we will only be able to do it very superficially. Far better to labour one major truth or emphasis and press it home.

5. Determining the Heart (of the sermon)

So, just as every text has one MTh or over-riding purpose, so every sermon or message should have one controlling or dominating theme.

Again let me quote me great preachers on the importance of this aspect of sermon preparation:

"For the sermon, as a living word from God to his people, should make its impact on them then and there. They will not remember the details. We should not expect them to do so. But they should remember the dominant thought, because all the sermon's details have been marshalled to help them grasp its message and feel its power."¹

"What is the sermon about?....Whether a sermon has two points or ten points, it must have one point; it must be about something."²

"I have a conviction that no sermon is ready for preaching, not ready for writing out, until we can express its theme in a short, pregnant sentence as clear as crystal. I find the getting of that sentence is the hardest, the most exacting, and the most fruitful labour in my study. To compel oneself to fashion that sentence, to dismiss every word that is vague, ragged, ambiguous, to think oneself through to a form of words which defines the theme with scrupulous exactness – this is surely one of the most vital and essential factors in the making of a sermon: and I do not think any sermon ought to be preached or even written, until that sentence has emerged, clear and lucid as a cloudless moon."³

Haddon Robinson who has probably done more than anyone else to emphasise the importance of what he calls 'the big idea' in a sermon, identifies five characteristics of a powerful central idea:

- i. *it has to be narrow enough to be sharp*
"if you have a vague idea, if it's too broad, too general, too abstract, it doesn't do anything for you. But when you get one that's sharp enough to get into your soul, that's important."⁴
- ii. *it has an expanding force*
"Often when you start, you wonder if you have enough to say to fill thirty minutes. But when you get hold of an idea or it gets hold of you, you wonder if you can get it said in thirty minutes."⁵
- iii. *it has to be true*
not just because it's in the Bible but deep down in your soul. "If you get an idea that gets hold of you and you sense it's true, it creates passion in you. The single most important ingredient in effective preaching is passion. It's not enthusiasm, it's not loudness; it's the sense that this matters."⁶

At my induction to my pastorate in Liverpool, one of my Deacons prayed to the effect that when I preached I might be in such a way that even if one of my hearers didn't believe what I said they would be in absolutely no doubt that I believed it to be true.

¹ Stott p225

² Broadus, John A 1979 On the Preparation and Delivery of a Sermon San Francisco Harper and Row p38

³ Jowett, J H 1912 The preacher, his life and work London Hodder and Stoughton p133

⁴ Robinson, H in The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching ed Robinson and Larson 2005 Zondervan p353

⁵ Robinson, H op cit p354

⁶ Robinson, H op cit p354

iv. *it has to be true to life*

It's all about the 'so what?' in preaching. If your hearers ask 'so what?' because they see and feel no connection between your message and their lives, then their response will be 'who cares?'

"a good idea is loaded with the realities of life. It's concerned with deep and universal problems. It wrestles with questions like life and death and courage and fear and love and hate and trust and doubt and guilt and forgiveness and pain and joy, the awful emotions of shame and remorse, and the great emotions of compassion and hope."⁷

v. *it has to be true to God's Word*

"We are not simply philosophers as preachers. We are not motivational speakers. We are people entrusted with God's Word."⁸

The only thing of any value or authority that we have to say from the pulpit or platform is that which we have drawn out of God's Word.

So, how do I go about formulating the burden, the 'big idea', the main theme or MTh of the sermon?

In order to determine the MTh of the text we asked questions of the text – what is being said, and how and why?

For the MTh of the Sermon, I need to build a bridge from there and ask, 'how can I say what Paul was saying to the Christians in Ephesus in a way that's relevant and applicable to my listeners on Sunday morning in Glasgow or wherever I am charged with the ministry of God's Word.

I take 'the brain' – the main truth I want to concentrate on and preach on - and ask three questions:

- i. What is the author saying?
It needs to be a complete idea, not a single word – remember 'accurate and adequate'
- ii. How does it apply to life today?
- iii. How can I express this in contemporary terms, in a way people will 'get it'?

Let's take our example - Ephesians 6:

- a. I take the MTh of this text to be something along these lines:
We need to put on the whole armour provided by God so that we can withstand the attacks of the devil
- b. I determine that the purpose of my message from this passage will be:
To encourage and motivate God's people to make use of God' provided armour in their battle with the devil
- c. Now I want to determine the MTh of my message – and to be faithful to the passage of Scripture, it must clearly connect with the text but it may say it differently. Also, it may not necessarily cover everything in the text, though if I only use part of it I must make sure I don't miss the overall burden of the text. For example, I may want to teach about the devil's works and ways, but it would not be right to do so without in some way pointing out the resources God has made available to us.

⁷ Robinson, H op cit p354

⁸ Robinson, H op cit p354

I might come up with something like:

Why should Christians put on the whole armour of God?

Or

How to effectively combat Satan

Or

Satan's strategies

However, it's a good idea to try to make your one sentence summary memorable so that your listeners will easily retain it in their memories once they have heard you say it two or three times. It can become the title of your talk or sermon and you keep referring to it – without labouring it – to remind your listeners what the whole point of the message is.

For Ephesians 6 this might be:

What to wear to war

Fight the good fight

Summary:

The heart of your sermon, the MTh is critical – which is why it must be clear and succinct in your own mind and heart. This then becomes the organising principle of your sermon. Everything you say will flow from, lead up to, and reinforce this truth.