

## Preparing to Preach

### 3. 'Every Text has a Heart'

As we begin to look at this next and critical step in our sermon preparation, can I remind you that we are still, at this stage, purely focussing on the text we are going to preach on and not yet seriously thinking about the sermon we are going to preach from that text. I know very well from my own experience that all too often, the mistake we make is that we get stuck into the preparation of the message before we have really got to grips with the meaning of the passage. That's why we have stressed the importance of taking time to become intimately familiar with the text – the rhythms and nuances, the meaning and structure.

So far we have really been asking two supremely important questions of the text –

- i. what is the writer saying?
- ii. how is the writer saying it?

Today we ask the third crucial question -

- iii. why is the writer saying it?

And the point I am trying to make over and over again, because it is almost impossible to overstress it, is - until we are sure about the 'what', the 'how' and the 'why' we dare not attempt to preach. Have you never had the experience of being in full flow on a Sunday morning, preaching your heart out, confident that the message you are bringing is well-constructed and follows all the principles of good exegesis and exposition, only to suddenly realise in mid-stream that you were actually missing the author's point? Have you never had the experience of sitting listening to a preacher and thinking to yourself, 'he's missed the point'? I've had both, and if there's one lesson I wish I'd learned from day one in my preaching experience it is what we are looking at today – don't try and prepare your sermon, let alone preach your sermon, until you are absolutely clear on what is *the heart of the text*.

Every text or unit of Scripture has one main theme or meaning, though it may have several applications. There will always be one unit of thought that binds together and gives meaning to all the details of the text. There may be sub-themes but they will always back up the central theme or what I personally call the **MTh** of the Text – 'the **Main Theme**'

"The fundamental aim in identifying the main theme and sub-themes is to establish the biblical author's and thus the Holy Spirit's intention and purpose in any particular passage of Scripture."<sup>1</sup>

Let me share with you what some of the great and good among preachers have said about this issue, just to press the point home to you.

"Any single sermon should have just one major idea. The points or sub-points should be part of this one grand thought....Every sermon should have a theme, and that theme should be the theme of the portion of Scripture on which it is based."<sup>2</sup>

The "preacher must develop his expository treatment of the text in relation to a single dominant theme".<sup>3</sup>

"Ideally each sermon is the explanation, interpretation or application of a single dominant idea supported by other ideas, all drawn from one passage or several passages of Scripture."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Newton, Derek 2003 And the Word became....a Sermon Fearn Christian Focus p85

<sup>2</sup> Miller, Donald G 1957 The Way to Biblical Preaching New York: Abingdon pp53-55

<sup>3</sup> Stibbs, Alan M 1960 Expounding God's Word IVP p40

<sup>4</sup> Robinson, Haddon 1980 Biblical Preaching Grand Rapids: Baker p33

Charles Simeon, perhaps my favourite Anglican of all time, put it like this, "Reduce your text to a single proposition, and lay that down as the warp; and then make use of the text itself as the woof; illustrating the main idea by the various terms in which it is contained. Screw the word into the minds of your hearers. A screw is the strongest of all mechanical powers....when it has turned a few times, scarcely any power can pull it out."<sup>5</sup>

So, you get the point. The next step in preparing to preach is to discover the heart of the text, the MTh, and then formulate a single statement with distils and crystallises that theme and from which our sermon will develop.

"The locating of themes is our first vital door into the process of exegesis that will become the bedrock of expository sermon construction"<sup>6</sup> To go forward without completing this stage in our preparation would be to try and build a superstructure without a foundation.

So, there are two steps –

- i. FINDING the MTh
- ii. FORMULATING the MTh

#### i. Finding the MTh

Here, we need to build on the work done in step two where we looked for and found the structure, or the bones of the text. You will remember we saw that there are big bones and small bones. The small bones are the sub points or ideas in the passage and the big bones are the major ones. Working with the big bones will help us to identify the MTh, the main theme of the passage, of which the big bones are themselves sub themes.

Let's take a very quick example from our working passage in Ephesians 3. We identified at least 5 big bones in Paul's prayer, forming a progressive sequence of thought which built towards the climax at the end of the prayer. None of those big bones, on their own, represent the MTh, the main theme of the passage, so none of them individually should form the MTh of our sermon. However, considering them together will help us to find the MTh of the text which, last time, we loosely identified as the steps to Christian maturity.

Now, two crucial things about the MTh –

- i. it must be ACCURATE
- ii. it must be ADEQUATE

In other words, the MTh of any passage or text must clearly reflect the TRUTH of that passage and the TOTALITY of that passage. It must distil, in a single statement or proposition, the whole, of which the big bones and main points are a part.

Let me quickly illustrate this again from Ephesians 3, though this is by no means an adequate or completely thought through MTh for this passage. If we said that the MTh of Ephesians was spiritual maturity, that would be accurate but not adequate, because we have not included the concept of the steps towards Christian maturity.

So, to find the MTh we need to take into consideration both the CONTENT of the text and the CONTEXT of the text.

#### ii. Formulating the MTh

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<sup>5</sup> Qtd in Stott, J R W 1982 I Believe in Preaching London: Hodder and Stoughton p226

<sup>6</sup> Newton, Derek op cit p85

Once we have clearly and correctly found the MTh, we need to formulate it in a single, propositional statement that will be the foundation for our subsequent sermon preparation. This is Bryan Chapell's '3am test'. If someone wakes you at 3am on Sunday morning you ought to be able to state in a single statement the central theme of the sermon. If you can't do that you probably haven't understood the text sufficiently.

John MacArthur puts it like this, "Once I have found it (the main expositional idea), I write it out in a complete sentence because it is crucial that the main idea of the passage be clear in my own mind. Subsequent development of the text hinges on it. This becomes the target I aim for in the exposition. It is also the primary message I want my people to retain after they hear the sermon. So it is crucial that the proposition be carefully thought through and clearly stated. Everything else in the sermon builds to support, elucidate, convict and confront the hearer with the main truth. This means every expository sermon is a unit with one main theme or topic, rather than a rambling through verse after verse."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> MacArthur, J 1992 Rediscovering Expository Preaching Word Publishing pp219-220