

Preaching the Gospel

A monthly magazine for preachers and those who want to preach.

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Some Thoughts About the Main Divisions of a Sermon

When I studied at Abilene Christian College (1949-1952), one of my textbooks was *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* by John A. Broadus, the first edition of which was copyrighted in 1870, the new and revised edition in 1926. It is rather wordy and the way of writing is old-fashioned, but the principles of sermon preparation have not changed.

In the chapter on *The Discussion* Broadus writes about (1) The character of the division; (2) Problems of order and management; and (3) Transitions. Here are some of his thoughts.

He writes: “The character of the divisions must be determined by their relation to the subject proposed and to each other.” He explains that the preacher must be careful to DIVIDE the subject, and that no division must contain the whole subject. He writes: “It is obvious that no one division should be coextensive with the subject; and yet inexperienced sermonizers sometimes unconsciously have it so.” Therefore when you write out your main points, check to make sure that one of your points does not state your whole subject. The divisions should be divisions, not the whole.

He then says that the main points, when properly written out, “ought to exhaust the proposition.” By this he means that you should be able to read your main points and see that they cover the subject so as to accomplish your purpose. So check your main points. Read them to yourself without reading anything else. Make sure they include all that is necessary to accomplish what you have proposed to do.

Then he says that the divisions “must be distinct and symmetrical.” We must be careful, therefore, not to make two points say the same thing. Yet it is amazing how easy that is to do. He writes. “It is not uncommon for unpracticed speakers to have one division that really includes another, and very common to see one that includes some part of what also comes under another.” Try to get a clear understanding of how you want to develop your subject. Think it out until you can see it marching toward the conclusion. Analyze until the parts become clear. Then you will be able to state each main point so that there is a progression, and no two points will be the same.

Concerning the need for the divisions to be “symmetrical” he writes, “The divisions must all sustain the same kind of relation to the subject proposed.” I would say, “Don’t go off on some other line of thought with one of your divisions. Make sure your divisions ‘march together’ to get you to your conclusion.” Also, the divisions should be stated in the same way. I prefer to write each main division as a complete sentence.

Finally he considers the order of the main points. He says, “It is obviously proper that those divisions should precede, which will help to understand the succeeding ones.” In other words, there should be a logical order to the main divisions so that you are proceeding with each one closer to your conclusion.

Warning: Many sermons do not have a logical flow to a conclusion. The sermon seems to be more a marching around in aimless circles, saying much the same thing with each main point. When your audience is expecting the conclusion at any time, yet you keep on preaching for another twenty minutes, the fault may be with how you have arranged your main points. Work hard to make your sermon have purposeful movement. The way you state and arrange your main points will determine this as much as anything else.

Should your main points be stated to your audience? In a sermon which is proving something, this is a good idea. It helps your hearers to follow your reasoning. In fact, giving the main points first, then calling attention to each one as you move from one to the other, and finally giving them in your conclusion is very helpful in such a sermon. On the other hand, where your purpose is to exhort with emotional impact, you may not want to call attention to the structure of your sermon and will not mention your main points. But you should have your sermon divided carefully even so.

Every part of a sermon is important, but none is more important than dividing up your sermon into its main points. Never stop working on this skill.

Preaching For The Wrong Reasons

Bobby Graham, Athens, Alabama, U.S.A.

Do you preach because of a spiritual passion to serve God and to save souls, or are you a hireling? If you stopped getting money for your preaching, would you continue seeking ways to preach the gospel of Christ?

Some evangelists have had to pick cotton or do other low-paying work in order to support their families when brethren refused to continue supporting them because they preached truth those brethren did not like to hear. In the years when the battle lines over church support of human institutions were being drawn, I heard men like Franklin T. Puckett say that they would return to the cotton fields before turning their backs on duty to God and truth. Are you willing to make the same sacrifice for truth?

I am afraid that too many preachers see preaching as a way to have a life of ease, easy money, popularity, and control. Is it possible that some have turned to preaching after they were not able to find another job? Some preachers seem to think that their responsibilities are finished when they have spent their “three or four hours a week,” because they do nothing the rest of the week. Whatever they get in support is too much for what they are doing! One young preacher said he was going to a certain place and “take over that church.” His motive for preaching was to be in control.

But the one who has Jeremiah’s attitude is the real servant of God. Jeremiah wrote:

O LORD, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived: thou art stronger than I, and hast prevailed: I am in derision daily, every one mocketh me.

For since I spake, I cried out, I cried violence and spoil; because the word of the LORD was made a reproach unto me, and a derision, daily.

Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay (Jer. 20:7-9).

Solving the Problem

The passage in Jeremiah teaches us that the preacher must look into himself and have an honest heart. The only preacher who pleases God is the one who is a dedicated disciple of Christ. He is not preaching just to get money, or to get control, or to have an easy life. He is preaching because the word of God is burning inside him and he must tell people about it.

This will mean that:

1. The preacher will look at himself as a servant—of Christ, of his brethren, and of the unbelievers. He will not worry about being high or low. He will just look to see how he can serve.
2. He will understand the work of the preacher. The preacher is not a church manager, or official visitor of the sick, or the church's "youth minister." His work is to herald the message of the King, to proclaim the Word, to bear the good tidings of salvation, and to be a servant of Christ and of all whom he can teach. In doing this work he will have his time occupied, thus having no time for the work assigned to others.
3. The church will support the preacher and elders financially and will not have the idea that the preacher is a "hired hand" (1 Tim. 5:17, 18).
4. We will stress the divine standards for preachers and quit emphasizing the human ones as absolutely necessary. The Lord said not a word about being college-trained, handsome, socially gracious, polished in speech, or ideal in family. While all of these traits might be desirable and helpful, God does not list these qualifications for a preacher. God has much to say about his faithfulness, lack of contentiousness, gentleness, ability to teach, forbearance, meekness, and soberness.
5. Congregations will take a more active role in preparing men to preach by converting them to Christ and filling them with God's Word to the point that they have to declare it. The best preachers are the men who were first genuine followers of the Lord. Men who have learned to be ministers (servants) of Christ and their brethren will not have to learn much when they begin preaching.
6. We must re-instill the spirit of sacrifice on the part of all Christians—preachers, elders, and the rest. Christians must sacrifice to support teachers of the gospel, preachers must be willing to sacrifice when the need requires it, and elders must sacrificially devote themselves to the care of the sheep.

When a man is supported for preaching or overseeing (the elder), this does not make him a professional, as in football or baseball. If he receives support he should be thankful for the grace of God seen in the lives of concerned brethren and he should be ready to give himself sacrificially to the great task of saving souls.

A preacher is first, last, and always a Christian, possessing the same responsibilities that all other Christians have. In the areas of personal work, visiting the sick, helping brethren or the congregation with physical labor, he must find time to work for Christ and for his brethren. He must never view himself as having none of these duties simply because of the added duty that he has accepted. He can do much good in his work, but only if he has the attitude of sacrifice in order to carry out God's will.

Readers' Comments

Thanks for the good work you continue to do.

I am a bit confused though, as the current issue is dated as Vol. 2, No. 4--March. Do you operate with a different calendar there? I know you are in a different time zone, but didn't realize that you had a different calendar.

good issue!

Paul, you imply a definition of "doctrine" that does not make sense. I agree that there are controversial topics that a preacher needs to engage in order to both round him and his audience out. But "controversial topics" is not synonymous with "doctrine". Hopefully our "doctrine" is the whole counsel of God. A man is preaching doctrine when he is speaking on easy topics just as much as when he is speaking on hard ones. I think you meant to say that a preacher needs to go after the "weightier" topics or the "meat of the word". In those topics he will find the challenge that requires a lot of study.

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I disagree with this paragraph:

But as pointed out to me many years ago, there is a difference between a farmer who preaches and a preacher who farms. The gospel preacher may farm in order to have enough to support himself and his family, and many did in years past, but their main aim in life is to preach the gospel and save souls. Farming (business) may be a necessary activity in order to fulfill his obligations, but the man is basically a preacher. That is his life. He will preach with or without support, whether he has to support himself or whether brethren support him.

A farmer (if he is a Christian) must have his main aim in life to preach the gospel and save souls (Acts 8:4, II Cor 5:10-11), and countless other passages).

Good issue Paul with good suggestions about working and motives for preaching. Thanks.

Great articles, Paul! Thanks for sending them.

Thank you for continuing to send us your magazine. I just wanted to take a moment and tell you how much I appreciate your efforts and your love of the Lord. You, and sister Williams, are an encouragement to me. I hope things are going well.

Thanks for the regular updates and thanks for your ongoing efforts.

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