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How to Analyze A Sermon

By Tal Davis

A man was once asked what was the most important thing he looked for when he entered his church each Sunday morning. He thought a minute, then answered, "The coffee pot! If I don't have a good strong jolt of caffeine I have a tough time staying awake through the service, especially the pastor's sermon. (Don't tell him I said that.)" That may be the testimony of way too many regular church goers. Years ago, when I was in college, I worked as sound technician for a large church's worship service on television. I sat at a small monitor in an audio booth and watched as the pastor stood at the pulpit preaching. One morning I noticed one of the choir members sitting behind him nodding off during his message. I'm sure the TV viewers and people in the congregation must have seen it, too. Unfortunately, from where I sat, there was nothing I could do about it.

Sadly, many people have a difficult time listening to a sermon. Often they will blame it on the person delivering the message, usually the church pastor. They may complain that the preacher has a boring or monotonous delivery, and that may be true. But more often the problem lies with their inability to know how to listen and analyze what the one giving the sermon is actually saying. In our current culture we are so used to listening to information that is given to us by radio, television, the internet, or social media, that we just passively take it in. That's true with church messages as well. How often do you really listen intently to what your pastor is saying in the sermon? In this article I will give you several important principles for listening to and analyzing the style and content of a sermon.

You might ask, what difference does that make? For one thing, you want to be sure a preacher is proclaiming a message that is based solidly on the foundation of God's Word. Many people can speak eloquently, but the content of what they say may be deceiving. A survey was taken years ago of experts in verbal communication. They were

asked to rank who they considered to be the most powerful public speakers of the 20th century. Among the list were John F. Kennedy, Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, and Billy Graham. However, hands down they selected Adolf Hitler as number one, not because they agreed with what he said, but because of the way he said it, enthralling thousands with his voice and delivery. The same can be said for preachers. Many dynamic preachers over the years have garnered large numbers of followers. But, when their teachings come under scrutiny by reputable biblical scholars, they are found to be less than sound, or down-right heretical.

That said, the main reason we should analyze a sermon is for our own benefit. If we can work through the physiology, so to speak, of the message it will allow us to better comprehend the preacher's purpose and meaning. Then, and this should be our goal as well as the preacher's, we can better apply the sermon to our daily lives. So let's examine some principles for analyzing a sermon.

Initially, let me say one other thing. In today's churches, preaching styles vary enormously, as do worship styles. Many, if not most, contemporary churches do not have a traditional pulpit from which the pastor delivers his sermon. Most may only have a small lectern or table upon which the preacher can put his Bible and notes. He will often move around the stage unhindered usually with a head-set microphone. Also, most use a power point screen to project an outline of the sermon points and Scripture verses as he speaks. These are excellent tools for helping people focus. Of course, many churches still follow the traditional format of having the pastor stand behind the pulpit.

In addition to this, preaching styles differ according to local customs, cultures, educational backgrounds, and personal tastes. Some are low-key and quiet. Some are loud and exuberant. Some are more like professorial lectures.

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In any case, these principles for analyzing a sermon are relevant regardless of the style used.

So to begin our analysis, we need to know simply what the sermon is about. This can happen before the preacher even begins. In many cases, we can find out the title of the sermon online or when we arrive at the worship center in the bulletin, or on a video screen. It may also list the primary Scripture passage for the message. This will give you an opening clue of what to expect when the preaching begins. Many churches print an outline or listening guide of the sermon for distribution as people enter the worship center for them to take notes. The title should have some relevance to the main theme of the sermon. For example it could be "Jesus is God!" John 1:1-5, 9-14. Or it could be stated as a question like, "Is Jesus Really God?" John 1:1-14. Sometimes it could be a catchy or humorous title like: "Jesus: Fraud, Madman, or God?" John 1:1-5, 9-14.

Whatever the title, it should reflect the primary focus of the message. In the above example the focus is "Jesus Christ is God!" John 1:1-5, 9-14. The primary passage is the foundation for the whole sermon. If there is no primary Scripture then the message may be hard to follow. In the above example the primary Scripture passage is John 1:1-5,9-14.

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ... 9 The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. 11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. 12 Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God- 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of hu-

man decision or a husband's will, but born of God. 14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:1-5, 9-14 NIV

At the beginning of his message the pastor will often introduce the passage or tell a story that will draw the audience's attention to the message. The best kind of introduction story, and some may be humorous, is one that has some relevance to the main point of the message. Also, the best sermons, in this writer's opinion, are those that use an expository method. That is, they follow the natural flow of a passage and delineate the key teachings of that passage. In this way the authority of the Bible is what is communicated, not just the opinion of the preacher. Now this puts a lot of responsibility on the preacher to make sure he has adequately studied the passage to be sure he has interpreted what it says correctly. Accurate biblical interpretation is crucial to authentic preaching. Anyone proclaiming the Word of God must know sound principles of biblical interpretation in order to present the truth accurately. In the past we have written about those principles, but in a future article we will review them again.

A competent pastor will utilize good Bible study resources to exegete a passage before beginning to write his sermon. Those resources include reliable commentaries by reputable evangelical Bible scholars, Bible dictionaries, concordances, lexicons, archaeology books, etc.

So once you have come to the point that you know what the sermon is about you can now listen carefully to discern the pastor's main purpose for it. Most preachers have one of the following six purposes in mind for their sermons (or at least they should have).

1. Evangelism - In this case the preacher's primary purpose is to present the basic gospel message and elicit a positive response to receive Jesus Christ as one's Savior and Lord. Obviously, this is almost always the

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main aim of professional evangelists. However, even local pastors should, on a regular basis, preach sermons that seek to win unsaved people to Christ. They should, however, try to balance it with other types of messages that will feed their flock in the other ways delineated below. (Note: Many pastors include an invitation to receive Christ in every sermon they preach as a side-light, but that may not be the primary purpose.)

2. Worship - The purpose for this sermon is to encourage the listeners to grow in their love and worship of God. It emphasizes teaching the congregation the importance of personal Bible study, devotions, and prayer.

3. Doctrine - The purpose of doctrinal preaching is, in terms understandable to the audience, to teach important theological principles and their biblical basis. The goal is to elicit the listener's intellectual and practical affirmation of those truths. A good informed listener will want to evaluate the accuracy of the preacher's theology. We would always hope that our church's pastor would expound sound theological principles. It doesn't mean he has to say everything that agrees with you. On secondary doctrinal issues, there is room for divergent interpretations. Nonetheless, in my experience, I have on occasion heard preachers, lecturers, evangelists, and even pastors make theological statements that were clearly outside the boundaries of orthodox historic Christian doctrine. So listen intently.

4. Ethics and morals - In this case the preacher explains the biblical bases for Christian ethical/moral principles, and encourages the congregation to exhibit them in their lives. Often ethical sermons are relevant to a current social, moral, or political issue being debated in society. A preacher delivering this kind of message, however, must be very sure that the ethical principle he is promoting is clearly based on solid biblical truth, and not just his own opinion. He must also be ready to face criticism from those who disagree. A good listener should be able to evaluate the Biblical correctness of the

preacher's position and be willing to discuss it with him if the opportunity arises.

5. Commitment - This type encourages listeners to make a full commitment to a specific action for God. For instance, the church may be having a special project to provide food baskets to needy people in the community. Therefore, the pastor will preach a sermon designed to encourage the people to take part in the project. Likewise, the church may be raising funds for a building campaign or some other financial need, so the pastor will preach to ask members to give.

6. Supportive (or Pastoral) - The purpose of these messages are to give positive support to people in the congregation who have special physical or emotional needs in their lives. Most funeral sermons are probably of this type. But it is certainly appropriate in other situations such as when people are facing serious illnesses or other problems in their families. (My thanks to my late preaching professor, Dr. Harold Freeman, for this list.)

Normally most sermons will fall into one of those six categories. As you listen to the introduction, try to discern which one seems to be where that day's message is going. It is not always easy, and in many cases it may actually involve more than one.

After the formal introduction comes the main body of the message. In an expository sermon the pastor will often have several stated points. Usually he will delineate each point one by one, often enumerated. Most sermons have from two to five points. Just one is often called a homily (and that may be all that's needed). More than five tends to sound like a classroom lecture. The points are often a restatement of the primary focus of the sermon and may even include the main title. Sometimes the points may be delineated by asking a question, with the answer given to emphasize the point. Then he will usually read or paraphrase a portion of the key Scripture passage from which he derived that point's content. The pastor will then exegete, or give

an **EXPLANATION** of the original meaning of the verses in clear language that the congregation can understand. This is where his study of the passage is so important. He wants to be sure he tells them accurately just what that passage truly said when it was written!

In many cases the preacher may interject a (and this is key) relevant **ILLUSTRATION** that will enhance the listener's understanding of the passage's meaning. It may come from personal experience, nature, history, literature, or the Bible itself. Years ago it was said, "The best thing about radio is the pictures." Good preachers draw the listener in by engaging their imagination to picture in their minds what he is illustrating in words. Many people will forget verbiage, but will remember vivid stories. So ask, how did the preacher's story illuminate his point, or did it? Not every point will necessarily include an illustration, but it should include the next item.

Following the expose of the passage and an illustration, there should be some element of **APPLICATION** of that particular point. The pastor takes what the Scripture said and meant when it was written and explains how it is relevant to his listeners' lives today. This is the most important part of any good message. If all the preacher does is talk objectively about a passage's historical meaning and does not give it any present application, he is only giving a lecture. That is not a Christian sermon. As you listen, ask how the pastor makes the point relevant to the congregation's present life situation and how they should incorporate it into their lives.

The final part of a sermon to analyze, of course, is its conclusion. This is when all that the pastor has said should elicit a response from his listeners. He should try to pull all his points together to a focus based on the key purpose of the message. If the purpose of the sermon was not obvious before, it should be now. As you listen to the final words, ask yourself, "Is the preacher directing his listeners to apply his message to do what he set out to get them to accomplish?" For instance, if the sermon was evangelistic, are people having a definite opportunity to receive Christ as their Savior and Lord? Or, if it was doctrinal, did the preacher teach or reinforce some key theological principle in ways that the people understood? Did he then encourage them to intellectually embrace it for themselves? The same idea applies to the other four types of sermons (see above).

The preacher may close with a prayer in which he asks the listeners to follow with him. He may give a public "altar call" in which the listeners are invited to step forward to make a commitment. He may ask for a show of hands to indicate a decision. Some churches distribute response cards on which listeners can record their decision to be followed-up later. However, if the pastor fails to elicit some kind of response to his message, either private or public, as appropriate for his purpose, then we need to ask why he delivered it to begin with.

Conclusion

So, next time you go to church, attend a revival or evangelistic event, or listen to a preacher on television or radio, take the time analyze the sermon. It will make listening to the message more of an active process for you. Furthermore, you will benefit much more from the message than simply sitting passively and just taking it in. You will become a critical thinking (in the positive sense) Christian, something that is needed today more than ever.

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