

# The Making of a Sermon

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In the 24 years following his ordination by the UPCUSA, Earl Palmer has prepared hundreds of sermons and prepared almost as many lectures on how he composed them. He graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1956 with the M.Div. degree and became the minister to students at University Presbyterian Church in Seattle. In 1964, Palmer and his family moved to the Republic of the Philippines where he served in the Union Church of Manila. He assumed his present pastorate at First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley, California, in 1970. His gift for preaching has been demonstrated in the classroom as well as in the sanctuary. He has taught at Union Theological Seminary and St. Andrew's Seminary in the Philippines; the Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley; and Regent College, Vancouver, B.C. In 1977, Palmer joined the Fuller faculty as adjunct professor of preaching and New Testament. In addition to his pulpit and classroom ministries, he has written many articles and books including *Salvation by Surprise: A Commentary on Romans*, *Love Has Its Reasons: Inquiry into New Testament Love*, and *The Intimate Gospel: Commentary on the Gospel of John*.

This is an article on a very practical subject: How is it that a pastor actually pulls together the many ingredients that combine to make up a sermon?

I realize that the journey involved in the creation of a sermon is a highly personal and individual endeavor. Therefore, the way I work at my task may not be the way you, my colleague who reads this story, will take on your own task. On the other hand, it is usually helpful to see how another person works, and for that reason I offer a few comments.

## First questions first

Christian preaching is a big responsibility: ". . . brethren pray for us that the Word of the Lord may speed on and triumph. . ." (II Thess. 3:1). Paul's request for prayer points up the need each Christian has for prayer and prayer support from other Christians. But the Thessalonian sentence also shows how very powerful is the gospel when it is turned loose.

Preaching has three main parts, and a mystery.

First, it has to do with the message that is to be preached; second, it has to do with the people who are to hear it; and third, it has to do with the person who is the preacher. Finally there is the mystery in preaching as the Word gives speed and confirmation to the sermon as it witnesses to the gospel.

The task of preaching, therefore, is always a threefold task. This article will primarily focus upon the message that deserves to be told.

## The message that deserves to be told

The basic issue for every pastor is this: Where do I find the message for Sunday morning? Is the message the story of my

own pilgrimage and experiences of God told weekly? Or is the message the various stories of the people—my companions of the way—told and retold? The pastor's task would then be primarily autobiographical and biographical. But these accounts, even if they were to contain the narratives of visions and dreams and miracles, are not the gospel. They may each bear contemporary witness to the goodness of God, but the gospel is the message about the Lord Jesus Christ.

"For visions and for all of the experiences of God's grace we are grateful, but they are not the source of our message. We do not proclaim them as if they were the Good News. What we must proclaim is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The authoritative witness to that gospel is only the Bible. This means that the authority for the church is not the church, not the existential experiences of the Christians, not the challenging new visions of spiritual leaders, not the revolutionary imperatives of each new era, not the safe status quo priorities of the present . . . The Bible derives its authority in the following fashion: As the historic Jesus of Nazareth is the only Redeemer and the Good News is complete in him, therefore there are no hidden new Gospels to be found or revealed. This conviction of the total sufficiency of Jesus Christ underlies the meaning of the doctrine of the infallibility of the Bible. By that doctrine we agree that only the one word which has been spoken in word and work — Jesus Christ himself — shall have final binding authority over our lives and our doctrines."

For this reason Christian preaching is biblical preaching. I define biblical expository preaching as follows: It is the task of enabling a text in the Old Testament/New Testament to make its own point within the whole witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to affirm that message persuasively to people in the language of daily life. If biblical preaching is my goal, then the next set of questions have to do with how I propose to preach biblically. Preaching is a spoken discipline and it is also a written discipline. The written part of the creation of a sermon in my case involves four phases.

*Phase 1: Writing your own commentary is the commentary.* I'm not talking so much about consulting a commentary, as I'm talking about writing your own commentary.



1. From Palmer's essay "The Pastor As a Biblical Christian" in *Biblical Authority*

The commentary upon the biblical text that the pastor writes is a foundation underneath preaching. That foundation does two things for a sermon. First it provides the depth from which authority and assurance grows into the freedom of communication. Second, the commentary upon the text becomes the most fruitful and explosive source for illustration and relevance touchstones, which in their own way become the vital ingredients of communication. The heart of the commentary method of Bible study is the art of posing questions to the text. Consider five groups of questions that come together in a commentary.

1) *The technical questions.* These are questions about the grammar, the meanings of words, the variants in manuscript evidences. The purpose of this part of the commentary is to establish the text so that we know and understand what the words mean, and what the sentences actually say. My resource for this work is the *The logical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Word Study Books, Commentaries.

2) The second set of questions are what I call *the historical settings of the biblical text* from two perspectives. First, the historical realities present within the text itself. This means that if the "Herodians" are being discussed in the text, as in Matthew 22, then I want to know all that I can discover about that party. My resource for this kind of work is the *Dictionary of the Bible*, background books, such as F.F. Bruce's *History of the New Testament*, and commentaries. There is another kind of historical question that is also very important, and that has to do with the form critical questions concerning the setting of the text itself within the New Testament Church, and the situation behind the text. This is the kind of question that wonders why John's Gospel is so insistent in the contention that John the Baptist is not the Christ (Jn. 1:1-18). Is that an indication of a controversy within the church and the larger community about the place and meaning of John the Baptist? The question asks about themes behind the text. This kind of historical questioning wonders not only about the content of the Psalms, but how the Psalms were used in Jewish worship and life.

The pursuit of these two sets of questions: the technical and the historical, amounts to a lot of hard work, and often a kind of work that appears obscure, or even irrelevant. But there is no easy way to build foundations, whether it is learning Greek or learning organic chemistry. The fact is that the hard work with the technical and

historical questions are foundation-stones for the preacher. The exciting thing is that some of the very best breakthroughs from a communication standpoint often show up in the middle of the painstaking research of these questions.

3) The third set of questions are what I call *the theological questions*. At this point in the commentary process we are attempting to draw together the intent and purpose of the text. What does the text mean? Our first task is to seek to draw up conclusions about the meaning and purpose of the individual text, and then to gradually widen its setting within its own larger paragraph and letter or book, and then finally to relate its teaching to the total biblical teaching on that subject. Once the interpreter dares to identify what a text is in fact teaching, then the interpreter is not only a technical, grammatical, word study craftsman, but also a biblical theologian. Biblical theology should always proceed and hold authoritative sway over systematic theology. In my view the best preaching, and the best theology, is the theology that represents a journey from the text to the world and back again.

4) The fourth question in the commentary process is *the contemporary question*. By this I mean all that is involved in the discovery of the relationship of the biblical teaching on a particular subject to the other world views of the century, contemporary to the writing of the Bible as well as those centuries that proceed and follow its time. For example, what the New Testament teaches about the meaning and purpose of human life is not taught within an idealogical vacuum. Rather there is already in place a climate and setting, an opinion structure and world view framework.

The contemporary question in your commentary process endeavors to relate biblical teaching to that cultural setting, tries to see clearly the collision points, the contrasts, and the similarities. Because the cultural settings are in continual flux, therefore the need for continual updating in biblical commentaries is essential. John Calvin's *Commentary on Romans* could not directly grapple with the world view of Karl Marx or Hugh Hefner, but we must. It is our challenge to accurately understand the relationship between biblical teaching and contemporary world views.

5) The final question is what I call *the discipleship question*. At this point in my study I bring myself under the word so that I may obey the gospel, and also experience the gospel. If a commentary is to be meaningful, it must have at its core this intention

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to hear and live the Word, as well as to understand and explain the Word. I like the way Rudolph Schnackenburg puts it: "Every commentary. . . . represents a scientific decision and a personal confession of faith."

Notice that an intellectual and existential journey is involved in the Commentary Study Method that I advocate as the beginning place for the Sunday sermon. This journey is made up of research demands that go against the grain of many pastors who have already used up their time each week in church administration, interpersonal caring, public speaking. The temptation in such instances is for the pastor to short-cut the process: the sermon preparation starts at question five and only glances at the last moment to check out a date in question one. The result is a form of preaching that is primarily devotional or issue oriented, and because the underpinning is shallow it becomes a very predictable and often faddish kind of preaching. What was a spontaneous personal touch on the Sunday that an outline came together at the last minute (by the grace of God) is now contrived and desperate. "The tediousness of Christian preaching is undoubtedly a greater danger to the church than all historical criticism put together." (Ernst Kasemann, *Jesus Means Freedom*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974). This assessment may or may not be true, but in my view the fastest road to tedium in preaching is the unprepared preacher. Do not short cut the five steps, and on the other hand do not stop short the five questions. There is a kind of preaching that is long on historical data, but rarely asks the hard questions that the text demands in order to draw out the implications of the text into the places where we live. It is a form of instruction in words and details, but it stays safely away from the discipleship question. Hence both warnings are urgent!

Phase one of my own method of sermon preparation is this ongoing commentary process which in one sense has its own inner driving force and integrity quite apart from the preaching task. I believe it is important for a pastor to read and study and write on a track that is independent from the regular speaking requirements of the minister's weekly schedule. I find that the most creative messages often come from that track. They are messages that demanded to be preached because of their own truth force. Now we are in place of genuine spontaneity, not off the top of your head or in the present feeling of your heart,

but out of the profound depth of the gospel message breaking in upon the church and its servants.

*Phase 2* of the building of a sermon for me is the development of what I call the *relevance paper*. This is the natural result of the commentary process. The only new ingredient that I add to that process is an atmosphere of total freedom with regard to input. I write at random my own responses to the meaning of the text and its implications. My basic approach is to dialogue with myself and with the text, and to set up a dialogue with my understanding of what would be the other world view convictions at large today. I try to put questions to the text.

The practical writing method that I have thus far described is whimsically described by C.S. Lewis in a letter he wrote to an American schoolgirl who wanted advice on the art of writing.

- 1) Turn off the radio.
- 2) Read all the good books you can, and avoid nearly all magazines.
- 3) Always write (and read) with the ear, not the eye. You should hear every sentence you write as if it was being read aloud or spoken. If it does not sound nice, try again.
- 4) Write about what really interests you, whether it is real things or imaginary things, and nothing else. (Notice this means that if you are interested in writing you will never be a writer, because you will have nothing to write about).
- 5) Take great pains to be clear. Remember that though you start by knowing what you mean, the reader doesn't, and a single ill-chosen word may lead him to a total misunderstanding. In a story it is terribly easy just to forget that you have not told the reader something that he wants to know — the whole picture is so clear in your own mind that you forget that it isn't the same in his.
- 6) When you give up a bit of work don't (unless it is *hopelessly bad*) throw it away. Put it in a drawer. It may come in useful later. Much of my best work, or what I think my best, is the re-writing of things begun and abandoned years earlier.
- 7) Don't use a typewriter. The noise will destroy your sense of rhythm, which still needs years of training.
- 8) Be sure you know the meaning (or meanings) of every word you use.<sup>2</sup>

*Phase 3* is the discipline which I call the *narrowing process*. The narrowing happens

as I ask the question "What themes are moving to center stage?" "Is there a thematic concentration that is emerging within the paragraph of the text?" What is now happening is that a theological dividing is taking place between primary and secondary themes within the text. In the case of expository preaching it is both theologically impossible and also homiletically disastrous to try to explain and exhort on the basis of every thematic possibility within a text. Therefore, the key homiletical challenge in expository preaching is the task of rightly narrowing the textual material so that a sense of focus develops. The purpose of the narrowing is to decide upon this focus and pointing of the message.

*Phase 4 is the message writing phase.* My approach is to concentrate in this final phase upon the core of the message. Everything else can wait until later. Let me be more exact; there are six essential parts of a sermon: 1) The introduction of the message; 2) the core of the message by which I mean the principal thesis affirmations of your sermon, and your support of those thesis statements; 3) the third part is the illustrative windows and bridges which support the comprehension of the thesis; 4) the fourth part is the conclusion of the message; 5) the fifth part is the title; 6) the sixth part is the setting of prayer, song, feeling, words that surround the message in its worship or presentation setting.

Each of these six ingredients is important, and each deserves thoughtful and strategic consideration.

The most basic is the development of the core of the message. My philosophy of preaching is to quickly begin a sermon, and to quickly conclude. This philosophy means that it is the content at the center upon which the sermon depends. Introduction and conclusion are two doorways, and I believe that the more quickly they are opened and closed the better.

The core of the message consists of the preparation for the thesis, the statement of the thesis, and the support of the thesis. The key questions that must always be asked while the preacher is at work in the writing of the message are these: Do I know what the words mean to me and to others? Am I clear? What other ways might I put the thesis to offer a parallel affirmation of the main points?

In the case of expository preaching it is necessary to develop background material and instruction in the text as a preparation for the thesis. But it is crucial that this back-

grounding does not become a substitute for the thesis. You have affirmed the thesis when you are bold enough to say: "This is what the text is teaching, and these are some of the implications of that teaching for our lives today."

Let me offer a few thoughts on illustration. Illustration is an art with three purposes. First, its purpose is to find the listener, and second, to help the listener find the speaker. It is like a bridge. Third, an illustration establishes contact between the listener and the text, so that a participation and a communication occurs in a new way between the listener and the text.

This means that an illustration often transforms the idea content present in a text with a concrete form which is then perceived at a different level than before. Where does the preacher find the right illustration to make use of as a window upon a text or as a bridge between the listener and the speaker?

The first and most basic place to look is within the material of the biblical text itself. I look first for the imagery already present.

The next place is within my own life experiences, and those of people I know. The third is within the vast resource of literature. Finally, there is the image building creativity of the preacher's own imagination.

An illustration needs the same attention to accuracy that the text deserves, because each illustration from life is close to some listener's area of familiarity.

At last the outline is drawn up for the spoken delivery of the sermon, and in my case that involves an expanded outline on two sides of a lined page. I always write my outline by hand.

Finally, there is the wonderful mystery of mere words made meaningful and helpful to people by the inward confirmation of the Holy Spirit, so that a person has been helped to see more clearly the kingly claim of the person of Jesus Christ and His love.

". . . pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed on and triumph." ■

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