



The General Conference
Sabbath School &
Personal Ministries



TO

SERMON PREPARATION

SEVENTH-DAY
ADVENTIST CHURCH 

Sermon Preparation is created by the General Conference Sabbath School & Personal Ministries Department

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SERMON PREPARATION

What Is Preaching and the Preaching Event?

It is an encounter of the divine and the human in which God speaks, the Son comes alive, and the Holy Spirit illumines so that the preacher and the congregation both hear from God and are transformed. For preaching to be effective, it must be God-infused from the inception of the sermon idea to the delivery of the sermon. Self must be eradicated and Christ must be elevated. The preacher is an instrument in the hands of God. He or she must be filled with God so the Holy Spirit can flow through him or her to the hearers.

Expanding on that, here is a selection of thoughts from a number of long-time successful Adventist preachers:

- God is the source of all preaching and without God there is no need to preach. Have an experience and then tell it. The life story of the preacher influences preaching. Preaching is divine truth communicated through a personality—bringing truth through personality. It is God's Word manifested in human personality for the purpose of touching other human personalities. A preacher who tries to hide his or her personality will never be an effective preacher. A sermon is like a photograph of the impact of a particular scripture on the speaker.
- The preacher is an interpreter. He or she takes the meaning of what is behind the text and explains it to people in the light of the contemporary situation, and that meaning must always be seen through Christ. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God, and that hearing is most often experienced through preaching. The revelation of divine power through the spoken Word is the recurring miracle which energizes and sustains the church. The preacher speaks with confidence and the power and authority of God. Preaching is communicating biblical truth from God, by God's power, for God's saving purpose. The objective is to motivate people to accept God's will and

plan for their lives. The preacher must bring his or her best to the Lord and the battle is the Lord's.¹

Seven Things to Know Before Beginning to Preach

The biggest task in preaching is preparation of the preacher, not the sermon. You must:

1. Know yourself.

What is your purpose for preaching? A wrong purpose would be to feel important or to feel power or control over listeners. Ask yourself if are you walking the walk or just talking the talk? Are you a seven-day Christian or just a seventh-day Christian. People respond to a good preacher rather than to a very able one who is not good and does not practice what he or she preaches. A good preacher is one who daily knows and loves Christ, knows and loves people, and is willing to work hard to bring the two together. Any other purpose is out of place in the pulpit. Preaching is putting the hands of your people into the hand of God, and to do that you must have hold of both. To do that you must follow the counsel Paul gave to Timothy, “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness” and to be “without spot or blame” (1 Timothy 6:11, 14, NIV).

2. Know your Lord.

We do not preach about *something*, we are to preach about a Person, Jesus Christ. Paul does not say “what,” but “Whom we preach . . .” (Colossians 1:27, 28). Don’t preach the cross, but the Christ crucified on it. All truth and all preaching are to be associated with Jesus. He appointed the twelve “that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach” (Mark 3:44, NIV). Notice, they first had to be with Him before He sent them out to preach. Not until we have spent much time with Him are we prepared to preach about Him. There is nothing harder than giving to others what you don’t have, trying to share a Jesus you don’t know. Fill your soul with Jesus. Then let your sermon be an overflowing. When you do this you have a compulsion to preach. You can hardly wait to preach.

3. Know your Bible.

Adventist preaching must be biblical. We are ready to use our mouth to speak only when with our eyes we have searched the Word and with our ears listened to the needs of our people. God will bless you even if you must begin with little knowledge and continue seeking more.² Paul told the young preacher, Timothy, “Preach the word” (2 Timothy 4:2, KJV). Let us notice three prerequisites to true Biblical preaching:

a. Biblical preachers believe the Bible works.

They love it too much to use it to simply enforce their own ideas. Typical preachers decide what they want to say and then go to the Bible to find texts to reinforce their ideas and to prove them right. Biblical preachers put the Bible first. They find their message in the Word. “Bible first” is their motto.

b. Biblical preachers spend time with the Bible.

We are told, “It is a sin to be neglectful of the study of the Word while attempting to teach it to others.”³ Every preacher needs a regular systematic Bible study program. Although it is hard work, digging deep into the Word will provide a richness that is both satisfying to yourself and a great blessing to the hearers.

c. Biblical preachers apply the Bible to themselves.

They never open the Bible without breathing a prayer that the Holy Spirit who gave the Word will interpret and apply it to their own lives. They plead that God will speak to them before He speaks through them. Then they study to find ideas that will change their hearers. As they study and find exciting ideas, they write them down in a journal. If you do this, when you are later looking for something to preach, you will be surrounded by ideas that truly interest you. Here is a great secret to interesting sermons. People get excited and will respond to that which you are excited about.

4. Know your tools.

Although your primary preaching tool is the Bible, other books, especially those written to help study the Bible, can be very helpful as aids to stimulate your thinking.

Bible versions.

As older Bible manuscripts are discovered and as language develops, new Bible versions are continually being published in various languages. Where we have them we ought not to be afraid of using them if they can help us understand the Word. Ellen White quoted from four versions beside the King James sixty-nine times in the book *Ministry of Healing* alone.

In sermon preparation it is best to begin your study with the version favored by most of your listeners and the one you will preach from; then use others to broaden your insights. Although they may be helpful, be careful about depending on or using paraphrased versions in the pulpit. You can use the internet to do word studies which involve the original Greek and Hebrew text.

b. Bible reference books.

If you have only one reference book it should probably be a concordance. William Miller studied the truths of the Advent Movement from only the Bible and a concordance. Other resources include Bible encyclopedias, which will provide you with information about Bible times, people, and places. Bible dictionaries define and enlarge on Bible words and terms. Topical Bibles are excellent help in preparing topical sermons and Bible commentaries (such as the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*) enlarge on the principle words or phrases in a text and also give an abundance of historical and other study helps. If you have a computer you can find software containing these and other study help books.

c. Ellen White books.

When asked how her writings should be used in preaching, she said preachers should begin their studies in the Bible and stay there until they had gleaned everything they can. Then they might see what light her writings shed on the passage. After that, preachers can go into the pulpit and preach from the Bible. Thoughts in *Christ's Object Lessons* and *Mount of Blessings* can be most helpful in preparing sermons on practical Christianity. However, it is not wise to read long passages in the worship service. If you use short, pithy, inspiring quotes listeners will be trained to appreciate the wise counsel God has so graciously given His church through her. You may want to devote a prayer

meeting series of studies to certain of her books. An outstanding research source is her entire writings available on compact disc.

d. Miscellaneous books.

In addition to the Bible and Bible related books it is important to read some secular material to keep contemporary and practical, but the sermon should be based on the Bible. Books of sermons can be helpful, but a sermon is as personal as a toothbrush. You ought to use your own.

5. Know your preparation takes time.

It is a tragic presumption to assume that the Holy Spirit will fill your mouth in the pulpit with what you have not taken time to learn in the study. The Holy Spirit will guide you in your study as much as or more than He will guide you in delivery. Study is hard work, but it is very enjoyable. It also takes time. How much time? The time spent by various experienced preachers varies. An old rule was one hour of study for one minute in the pulpit. Others take longer. Think not of the time you spend but of the time your audience spends listening. If you preach a 30 minute sermon to 50 people you have taken 25 hours of their time. See that their time isn't wasted.

a. Take time to pray.

Sermon preparation should begin on your knees and continue throughout. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you what He wants you to give to His people.

b. Start early.

Your creativity and brain work better when there is time to study and contemplate. Practical illustrations that fit your text that people can relate to with interest and that meet their needs will have time to develop from your everyday life.

c. Plan yearly.

Yearly planning produces balanced preaching that can give your people a balanced spiritual diet. It saves time. When ideas come to you day by day you can assign them to the various sermons you plan for the year. This will result in far better sermons than a hit and miss approach.

6. Know your sermon type.

To give your sermons more variety (which the people will love) you need to know the different sermon types. Preparation is different with different types of sermons. You start with a Bible passage, a Bible topic, a Bible character, or a Bible verse depending on whether your sermon is to be expository, topical, biographical or textual.

a. Expository.

This type is an explanation of three or more verses. It could be a paragraph, chapter, or a book. It often follows the order of the passage. It generally leads to in-depth preaching that explores the mind of the writer rather than the preacher's thoughts. A weakness could be too much emphasis on explanation and too little on application. As Spurgeon said, "The sermon begins where the application begins." Spend *some* time on what the passage says or means, but *much* time on what difference it makes. Don't make your people spend the whole time in Palestine. None of them live there during the week. It is wise to study the passage until the Holy Spirit convicts you with one basic truth most obvious in the passage or most needed by the congregation. Focus your exposition on that truth and pass over everything extraneous to it.

b. Topical.

A topical sermon is one in which a subject is chosen and the Bible as a whole is researched on that subject. The content and form owe more to the topic than to any one passage of scripture. The topical sermon will be more accurate than the expository sermon in arriving at what the Bible really teaches on a subject when the whole Bible is searched to arrive at the truth. One type of topical preaching would include clarifying the beauties of our church doctrines. It is wise to preach on every Adventist doctrine within each three year period to keep the members Adventist Christians. If one just preaches "love" the members soon become generic instead of Adventist Christians. Be sure to dig deep and make the doctrines contemporary and practical. And be careful not to use texts out of context, making them say something they don't say.

c. Biographical/Narrative.

This preaching normally centers on the story of a Bible character or incident. Narrative preaching typically places the

story in a contemporary setting with the preacher telling it in the first person. Biographical preaching is closely related but usually places the story in the setting in which the Bible character lived. Biographical/narrative preaching is preaching the most like the way the Bible writers wrote. They were master story tellers, as was Jesus. Ellen White wrote, "As an educator no part of the Bible is of greater value than are its biographies."⁴ Since many people already know the Bible stories, it takes careful research and deep thinking to make old stories fresh. These sermons can be very interesting and practical, but the congregation can go away entertained only unless you focus on the lesson the story or narrative teaches and drive that point home. Study every fact the Bible has, add historical facts, learn all you can about the times and make certain the insertion of your imagination does not lead the audience to depart from the lesson the Bible teaches.

d. Textual.

The textual sermon is one based on only one or two verses. Because the passage is short the sermon may be simpler and easier to understand as you drive home a single idea. Typically, the outline or organization of the sermon comes directly from the text. Thus it may be easier to organize. The potential weakness of this type is that it may become less biblical and the text a mere spring board as the preacher sails into the stratosphere of his own ideas. Expanding 15 words from scripture into 5,000 from the preacher isn't conducive to truly biblical preaching.

e. Combinations.

Combining some parts from every type is alright, but you should decide which you intend to follow before you begin preparing. If you have always used one of the sermon types, we would urge you to experiment with others, even though it may take more effort. It will give your preaching more balance and you just might find other types that fit you better and that may be more effective.

7. Know the segment method of sermon preparation.

It can seem overwhelming to face writing a whole sermon, but if you divide it into small segments it makes it easier. The segment method helps keep it Bible-centered and very interesting. Each

segment includes illustration or practical application. These are all through the sermon, only a few minutes apart. Each segment is about two to five minutes in length. They are related to one another and to one basic theme. Put four to six together. Add an introduction and a conclusion and your sermon is ready.

Each segment has three parts: lesson, proof and illustration/application:

a. *Segment lesson.*

This is the spiritual truth you want your listeners to learn and follow. It must express a point of view. It's not just the subject of your segment, but what you are going to say about it.

b. *Segment proof.*

Usually your lesson and the proof for it will come to you together. The proof should most often come from the Bible. Reason and philosophy do not feed the soul and change lives. The Bible does. The Bible must be your source of authority. It is an inexhaustible source. You should come to the Bible first. Biblical preachers do not open the Bible to find something that agrees with what they want to say; they study the Bible with much prayer to find what it wants them to say. As you study you will find an inspirational thought. That thought is what we mean by "lesson." The Bible verse or word is your proof. Now you already have two of the three parts of your segment.

c. *Segment illustration/application.*

The purpose of preaching is to relate Scripture to what is happening now. Preaching is bridge building. It builds a bridge from the past to the present, from the Scripture to the street, from the Savior to the sinner. No bridge works unless it's firmly anchored on both ends. To be successful, you need to emphasize both what God wants and what mankind needs. His message was given to help people whom He loves dearly and it must be applied in a practical way to the needs of your listeners. Not every "lesson" needs an illustration, but every lesson needs an application and a good illustration is often the best way to apply your "lesson" to life. You may get illustrations from the newspaper, books, etc. but the best ones come from typical life situations. By keeping the "lesson" in the back of your mind, you will often find

these while just living during the week. The sermon should not just be an entertaining story. The purpose of the story must be to apply the lesson and text to life. So segment preaching offers a couple minutes of lesson and proof followed by a couple minutes of illustration /application (story telling) followed by lesson, proof, illustration/application from the next segment and the next, etc. Use enough illustration so your listeners will hear and enough lessons so they are helped.

Sample segments:

- 1) Lesson: Every human refuge eventually fails.
- 2) Proof: Read Psalms 46:2, 3. Mountains are immovable and unshakable. David is asking, "What will you do when the unshakable shakes?"
- 3) Illustration/application: Every human refuge eventually shakes and fails. A father loved to throw his baby in the air and catch him. The baby loved it too and always laughed, but the father failed to catch him once, and the baby landed on the floor. Fathers fail but God never does. Some hurt is pressing on every heart here: the death of a loved one depended upon for many years; a loveless marriage; a child who left the Lord; health that is failing; work that isn't working. But "God is our refuge." Martin Luther had it right when he wrote, "A mighty fortress is our God a bulwark never failing." Every human refuge eventually fails, but Jesus never fails.

Six rules for good segments:

- 1) The lesson must be true. Do not preach something speculative or questionable. Preach what is true to scripture.
- 2) The lesson must be important. The idea that Peter was married is not significant enough to preach about. Never just preach a topic, but always a point of view that has some depth of meaning and will be helpful to your listeners today. Not "The nature of sin," but "Sin destroys you and me. God's love restores us." Not "Christ deals

with sin,' but "Christ frees you and me from both the penalty and power of sin."

- 3) The lesson must be fresh, contemporary, practical and interesting. Don't say the same truths in the same old mundane way. Not "We ought to join the church," but "The church is a special exciting gift from Christ. He gave it to us so that surrounded by loving Christians we can better learn to love Him and His children!"
- 4) The proof must directly prove the lesson. Never use a verse as proof unless it makes a clear, direct case for a lesson. Example: You could use John 3:16 to prove that "Love leads to giving." Or that "God loves everybody." There is direct proof for those lessons in the text. But you shouldn't use, "have eternal life," to prove "Jesus is coming again." The text doesn't prove that. Make your proof direct and easy to catch.
- 5) The illustration/application must directly fit the lesson.
- 6) The illustration/application must practically apply the lesson to life, such as: "Think about the anticipation you feel when waiting for your dinner to cook." Jesus illustrated with things people would often do so that the lesson of his sermon was repeated every time they did it.

Ten Steps in Sermon Preparation

1. Choose your Bible passage or topic.

Here are three questions that will help you choose your passage or topic:

a. What is your objective?

Precisely what do you hope to have happen to your listeners? In addition to studying the Bible, good preachers study their congregations and their needs as a whole. Remember you are preaching to the whole congregation and not just to a few. You need a specific objective in mind as you begin.

b. What will be your sermon type?

Expository? Topical? Biographical/Narrative? Textual? Remember it is not wrong to choose a subject before going to the

Bible. It is wrong to decide what you're going to say *about it* before going to the Bible. Deciding what to say and then finding a Bible text that enables you to say what you want to say is not Biblical preaching.

c. *What have you recently read?*

If you have been studying the Word daily to feed your soul, you will have more passages crying to be preached than you can use. Watch for and collect ideas and illustrations you encounter day by day and keep a journal of what inspires you when reading devotionally. What inspires you will probably inspire others.

2. Study your passage to first find segment lessons and proof. (This is the biggest step of the ten.)

a. *How to study your passage:*

Study to find God's Word about humanity. Pray, asking God to give you a message He wants you to share. Only the Holy Spirit can interpret it to human hearts.

Read the passage rapidly several times, asking three questions: What does it say (investigation)? What does it mean (interpretation)? What difference does it make (application)? Get the overview first. See the forest first before examining the trees and the leaves. What is the author talking about and more importantly, what is he saying about it?

Read the passage slowly, carefully, meditatively. Look for key words. Read it in every translation or version available. Paraphrased versions will give you ideas, but don't depend on them for accuracy.

What is the context, before and after? What is the setting? Who is writing to whom and why? Visualize the scene.

In your study, sift through the "ore" minutely, intensely. In the pulpit show only a few of the clear positive, Christ-centered, hope-centered truthful nuggets that bring a positive response (I Thess. 2:9, 12). A sermon is like the spoke of a wheel. It must be fastened to Christ at one end and relate to life at the other. It does no good unless fastened at both ends.

After you have gotten everything possible from the Bible, you may go to commentaries, beginning with the inspired commentary of Ellen White. In the end don't over prove. Preach from the Bible. If you need a quote apart from the Bible let it be only a phrase or sentence or two that precisely meets your needs.

b. Don't preach without organizing.

Don't organize before or after you research. Do organize as you research.

c. As you study, write down each individual idea, lesson, proof, illustration and application on a separate small piece of paper (3x5).

These can later be moved around and arranged in order.

On a large sheet write "Possible Theme" at the top and in the middle, "Possible Outline." Use this to organize as you study and pray. Every time you write an idea on a 3x5 ask yourself, "Could this be a point on my outline? Or does it suggest a possible skeleton for organizing my sermon?" If the answer is "no," don't worry. If the answer "yes," scribble it down on your large sheet under "Possible outline."

d. Develop your theme as you go.

The sermon theme is the gist of the sermon in one sentence. It's helpful to differentiate between the three "t's" of preaching: The topic is the general subject. Your title is what you call it. Your theme is what you're going to say about it. You want your listeners to remember your theme, which is something about a topic that is special and applicable to their lives.

Ask yourself what your heart burden is—what you specifically want the people to take with them. Put it in a brief memorable sentence and you have your theme. You may find this to be the hardest, most exacting and yet the most fruitful part of sermon preparation. Your theme helps you and your congregation to know the purpose of the sermon.

The best sermons do not exhaust listeners by saying a great many things, but inspire them by saying one thing in enough great ways to make a deep impression. That one thing is your theme. Make everything else in the sermon focus on and amplify it, and it will go out the door with your congregation.

Ellen White described ineffective preachers: “They touch here and there, bringing a large mass of matter which they regard as convincing and overwhelming evidence, but in fact they buried the truth under a mass of matter poured out upon the hearers, so that the points never could be found. . . . So many subjects were brought into one discourse that no point stood proved and clear.” ⁵

At the beach, you lie comfortably in the warm sun just about to fall asleep. But a boy with a magnifying glass focuses that same soothing sun on one spot in your back and suddenly you’re wide awake. Preach a little of this and a little of that and a bit of something else and your congregation may be comfortably lulled to sleep. But focus on one Bible-based, Christ-centered theme and you’ll wake your people up.

A sermon is like a river with tributaries running into it. The river is the sermon theme and the tributaries are the various parts of your sermon outline. Just as each tributary flows into and expands a river, each part of your outline flows into and expands the sermon theme. But the flow of water begins in the tributaries before it flows into the river. This illustrates that you can’t settle on your theme until you know what material you have to pour into it. Your theme must grow out of your research material. Ideally, it should come to you, neither before you study nor after you study, but as you study.

3. Add illustrations/applications to complete each of your segments.

Finding contemporary ones may come best as you pray and go about your normal business with lesson and proof in the back of your mind. When one comes to mind, write it down immediately.

a. Importance of practical application:

It answers the question, “What does this mean to me in my daily life?” Bible lessons will come to life with a current real life example that puts your listeners in the picture. Showing pictures of your family is not exciting to them unless they are in the picture. People’s first interest is themselves. Make your sermons about them and they’ll be interested.

Practical application is especially important to young people. Grandparents basically want to know, “Is it true?” They need proof texts. Parents—“Is it loving?” But with more broken homes than ever, young people are more concerned with, “Does it work?” They want practical application.

God’s Word is full of His leading His people through practical problems of daily life. Paul spoke to the peoples’ specific needs, temptations, and problem—and most of Jesus’ teaching was in parable form so the people could understand truth as it related to life. Truth was meaningful only as it helped people. God’s first love is not ideas, but people. Know your people and their needs. Your entire sermon must not come from books or the Book, but must relate to people in your city, not Jerusalem.

b. Importance of illustrations:

Illustrations are especially important to Christian preachers because they were so important to Christ’s preaching. “He did not say anything to them without using a parable” (Mark 4:34). With Jesus, the kingdom was always “like” something. In His teachings the unknown was illustrated by the known truth— by familiar things. Illustrations help hold attention. Faith is built by “hearing” the Word (Romans 10:17). Illustrations capture people’s attention so they can hear and receive the teaching from the Word, which builds their faith. You may give an overwhelming amount of profound truth, but it is useless unless you have their attention so they “hear” and receive and utilize it. Illustrations are not to entertain but to enable them to “hear” the teaching.

Illustrations motivate by adding emotion to your logic. Though overly emotional preaching is to be shunned, people usually act according to how they feel about the logical presentation. Some emotion helps motivate to action.

Illustrations help listeners retain truth longer. A sermon lesson is like a nail. An illustration is like a hammer that drives the nail home. If you want your sermon to go on preaching itself all week long, do as Jesus did. Illustrate it with things people will be doing all week long.

c. How to use illustrations:

Again, the reason for them is to make the lesson clear and to help apply it to life. Illustrations turn on the light. “Illustrate” comes from the Latin “lux” meaning light. They are like a window in a wall of truth that let the light in, but they should not be the whole wall. Use your illustration to shine light on your lesson so members will remember it.

d. Sources of illustrations:

Bible illustrations.

Use less familiar stories or research familiar ones so they are seen in a vibrant new light. Put them in a modern setting.

Other sources:

Take them from good literature, biographies, science, sports, art, newspapers, magazines, history, family life, congregational life, past experiences, books of illustrations, etc. Start your sermon early so you know what lessons you want to teach. Then pray, search, and watch for ways to illustrate those lessons during the week. Occasionally, a personal experience of how the truth helped you solve a problem could be useful. Don’t belittle your spouse or children by using inappropriate illustrations about them.

If you use an imaginary story, people should know it is not true. Begin like this: “Imagine with me. . . .” Or, “Let’s pretend. . . .” Or, “What if . . .?”

Your own experience from your heart is better than those found in a book of illustrations, although the book may be helpful in reminding you of one and helping you polish your own.

e. Use illustrations/applications to finish filling out your segments.

Now you’ve finished gathering your material. Hopefully, everything you are going to say in on your 3x5’s. Remember, the three parts of a segment are lesson, proof, and illustration /application. If your lessons came as you studied the Bible, chances are you already have lesson and proof on the same 3x5. Your next task is to find the best illustration or application to fit each lesson. Lay each segment containing lesson, proof and illustration together on the desk.

4. Choose theme and outline.

If you've followed the suggestions in step 2, ("On a large sheet write "Possible Theme" at the top, and in the middle, "Possible Outline") you now have a sheet with the top half scratched up with possible themes and the lower half with possible sermon outlines. Now you have several possible themes and outlines from which to choose.

a. Choose your theme, which is the gist of your whole sermon in one sentence.

It is the one idea you want the people to take home. It must be true, Biblical, important, and relate to Christ. It must fit your segments—your materials you've gathered.

A theme should be worded properly. Here is a sample of good wording: "Christians look at ultimate, not just immediate results." Below are five rules for wording a theme, followed by five wordings of the above theme that break these rules. A theme should be:

- 1) A point of view, not just a subject. If we said, "A comparison between looking at ultimate and immediate rewards," that is a subject, not a point of view. That title breaks the rule.
- 2) Simple, not complicated. Saying, "Spiritual productivity necessitates eventual goals precluding instant" is very complicated; it breaks the rule.
- 3) Declarative, not interrogative. "Do Christians look at ultimate, or just immediate results?" That breaks the rule because it inquires instead of declares.
- 4) Straightforward, not an analogy. "Christian eyesight focuses on overcoming shortsightedness," would break the rule.
- 5) Positive, not negative. "Christians do not look at just immediate results," would break the rule.

b. Choose your outline.

In order to teach your theme, with the help of the outline ideas you have listed on the large sheet, choose an outline that best uses your segments.

c. Sample themes and outlines:

Here are two samples of themes and the sermon outlines that teach and enlarge on them. First, a topical sermon on the Sabbath:

- Theme: Love demands time together
- On Sabbath, through worship, we learn of God's love
- On Sabbath through nature, we see God's love
- On Sabbath through family togetherness, we experience God's love
- On Sabbath, through missionary activity, we share God's love

Second, a more detailed outline of an expository sermon from John 4:

- Theme: To be Christ-like is to be a soul winner
- I. To be Christ-like is to go out of our way for the sake of others. [Segment based on verses 3, 4]
- II. To be Christ-like is to work even when weary.
 - A. There is more to life than physical needs. [Segment based on vs. 8]
 - B. Meeting Jesus makes physical things seem less important. [Segment based on vs. 28-30]
- III. To be Christ-like is to value the single soul. [Segment based on vs. 7a]
- IV. To be Christ-like is to win others through kindness.
 - A. Kindness attracts. [Segment based on vs. 7]
 - B. Kindness reaching down the social ladder is most effective. [Segment based on vs. 9, 27]

5. Organize your sermon.

By following the above four steps the sermon is partially organized, but there is more. First, we must emphasize again the importance of organization. It makes a sermon easier to preach, easier to listen to and easier to understand. Your goal should be to

bring your listeners deep thoughts, simply expressed, and practically applied.

A sermon has three parts: *introduction*, *body*, and *conclusion*. Basically you have three tasks in preaching: to interest, to instruct, and to impress or lead to decision. Interest is emphasized in the introduction, instruction in the body, and impression or decision in the conclusion.

a. Introduction:

Although the introduction is the first part of the sermon, it should be one of the last parts prepared. To introduce a person you should know him first. To introduce your sermon you should know a lot about it first. Here are three purposes of the introduction:

- 1) It gains attention.

You need to be precise. Know exactly what the first and last sentence of your sermon will be. Gain their attention and interest in your topic within the first 60 seconds. A minister who wanted to gain the attention and interest his people in the topic of legalistic religion introduced it with this illustration: "Nineteen hundred years ago there was a religious group who kept all the commandments, paid a faithful tithe, was most faithful in every detail of religious life and they murdered Christ!"

In gaining attention, start where your people are. Using an illustration or question, talk about a common problem and lead up to your sermon theme, which is your proposed answer to the problem.

- 2) The introduction gives your theme.

Go beyond the topic to the theme, which is what you are going to say about the topic. For example, don't say, "I'm going to talk about attitudes," which would be the topic. Rather, introduce your theme, by saying, "The idea I would like us to think through together is this: We see things, not as they are, but as we are."

To make your sermon clear, it is good to give your theme in the introduction, in the conclusion, and wherever it fits

nicely in between. Repetition of the theme contributes to its leaving with the listeners.

- 3) The introduction can give a pre-summary.
If you've seen the whole picture, a jigsaw puzzle is much easier to put together. This doesn't always need to happen, but if your introduction gives a little overview of your sermon, probably right after you give the theme, the congregation will find the sermon much easier to put together as they listen. For example, you might tell them, "First we'll talk about why we ought to love; then we will talk about how to love."

b. Body:

This, of course, is the main portion of your sermon which we have discussed under steps one to four.

c. Conclusion:

The conclusion is the most important part of the sermon and usually the hardest to prepare. Consequently, preachers often preach elephant sermons. An elephant sermon is one having a big head at the beginning, plenty of body in the middle, but almost no tail at the end. The conclusion seems just an afterthought.

Preaching is like piloting an airplane. There are two crucial moments: getting off the ground and landing it. A salesman knows that no matter how fluent his sales presentation, if he doesn't know how to "close" the sale, he starves. The preacher must know how to conclude so that listeners decide what action they're going to take.

The first part of the conclusion should be a summary of the sermon. The last part ought to be a call to action.

- 1) Summary:
Don't present any new arguments. Don't summarize only part of the sermon body. You can drive your point deeper home if your summary pulls together your whole sermon. Worshipers see how the individual parts of the sermon fit together and they see the whole picture. That is why a well-prepared summary is so essential. You can merely repeat thoughts already stated, but the most interesting

summary presents them in a new way with perhaps an illustration. It can be done in a few words.

2) Call to action:

The summary reviews and informs. The call to action challenges each listener to act on that information. The summary instructs the mind. The call to action confronts the will. A discourse is not a sermon unless it does both. When there is a knock at your door it is not just to inform you that someone is there. The knock demands action. It is not enough to give people the information that Jesus knocks at their doors. His knock demands action. You don't preach on forgiveness so that people will just believe in forgiveness, but that they might experience it. Every sermon should include a logical and non-manipulative call to action.

Here is a brief sample of a conclusion:

(Theme): "We find happiness, not by seeking it, but by seeking Christ. (Summary): Don't be like Solomon who learned the source of total happiness too late in life.

(summary illustration): In each of my hands I hold a key. One opens one door, the master opens every door. Christ is the master key to happiness. He meets every need.

(Call): Reach out right now and take hold of Christ, the master key. (Theme): We find happiness not by seeking it but by seeking Christ."

In the sermon introduction tell them what you are going to tell them. In the body, tell them. In the conclusion, tell them what you've told them and what they should do about it. Call them to do it.

d. How to proceed in organization:

Now write in red each part of the sermon outline (introduction, theme, lesson, conclusion) on a separate 3x5 and place them in order from left to right on the far side of the desk. Now start through the segments you've already prepared, placing each under the part of the outline where it fits and your sermon is virtually prepared.

6. Change and delete.

It is now time to improve what you have by changing and deleting.

a. Change outline.

Some of your segments may not work with this outline. Either change the outline or put these segments away for use in another sermon. Look for balance in your outline. For example, if you have three divisions, but 80 percent of your material fits only one of the three, you should change the outline or the material you choose to keep. You may even need to change the theme to fit both the material and outline.

b. Control length.

The length the sermon depends on the culture, time of day, comfort, situation, etc. Usually 20 to 25 minutes is enough. Stop while your listeners wish there was more, rather than after they wish there had been less. Stop preaching before your people stop listening—while they are still hungry for more.

c. Delete material.

Poor preachers quit digging before they get enough material. Fair preachers quit when they have barely enough. The best preachers quit when they have twice as much as they'll need so they can enjoy culling out everything but the best. In selecting give preference to whatever relates most directly to Christ. File the good material you don't use for later. It is difficult not including great ideas that don't fit this sermon, but it must be done.

7. Write out your notes or manuscript.

It is up to you as to the way you prepare your notes for preaching. The best way to prepare is to do everything possible ahead of time. The word for word manuscript approach forces you to a more complete and precise presentation. It is a challenge and it takes practice to preach from a manuscript and keep a warm contact with the audience, but it is possible. You can stagger words, highlight, underline, circle words or phrases, etc. Then, review it many times before delivery. This certainly is the most exact way to include all that you want to say. Some great preachers always write everything word for word even if they don't

refer to the manuscript constantly. Remember, the Holy Spirit will guide you as you write the words, as well as in the delivery.

If you choose to follow brief notes on each item and segment, it requires you to think more on your feet. There is a great danger you will wander from your notes and say things that don't fit, diminishing the impact. God will guide you in choosing your approach.

8. Prepare yourself.

Speaking of the very first Christian preachers, Ellen White wrote, "They were not authorized to preach a single discourse except under the influence of the Holy Spirit. They had strict orders to tarry in Jerusalem until they were endued with power from on high."⁶ Here are some questions to pray over before you preach:

a. Is your life centered in Christ?

To preach Christ-centered sermons, you must be a Christ-centered preacher.

b. Is your motive right? Is it to be helpful, or to be appreciated?

The ego is terribly at risk in the pulpit. If you do well, the devil will tempt you to be proud. If you do poorly, he will try to discourage you.

c. Do you love your listeners?

If you do they will generally love you and your message. Will you love them even if your sermon doesn't change them quickly? The oak tree is a miracle: it grows slowly but very strong. Often, members are the same. They change slowly. Preaching to a congregation is like throwing buckets of water over a room full of bottles. Some are wide-mouthed and receive much, and some are tiny mouthed pop bottles and receive little. Much is lost on the floor.

d. Is your objective clear in this sermon?

Do you know where you are going with this sermon? Has the Holy Spirit shown you? What is your destination?

e. Is your heart moved by your message?

We move others best with what moves us most. It is said, "The arrow dipped in your own blood speeds unerringly to its target."

9. Preach.

Some sermons are preached but not “delivered” into the minds and hearts of the people. Here are a few areas involved in sermon delivery:

a. Stage fright.

This can be a challenge especially when beginning. Here are some solutions:

- Prepare diligently. If you have prepared conscientiously, know your message well, and are enthusiastic about it, stage fright is diminished.
- Breathe deeply as you wait.
- Imagine Jesus standing beside you enabling you to speak His message.
- Find some friendly faces, one on the left, one in the center and one on the right. Move your eyes from one to the other. Speak to them.
- Speak often. Practice makes perfect.

b. Use of words. In your use of words:

- Be clear—use good words all can understand. Either too ornate or too poor a use of words attracts attention to yourself and away from your message.
- Be accurate—don’t exaggerate.
- Be included—use “we” often and “you” seldom. Include yourself as in need of the truths you preach.
- Be yourself—be natural. Any airs or pretentiousness will distract.

c. Voice.

We have been instructed: “The tones of the voice have much to do in effecting the hearts of those that hear.”⁷ “With the voice we convince and persuade. . . .How important, then that it be trained. . . .There are many who read or speak in so low or so rapid a manner that they cannot be readily understood. Some have a thick indistinct utterance; others speak in a high key, in sharp, shrill

tones, that are painful to the hearers.”⁸ Always speak distinctly. Any variation in pitch, rate, and volume helps keep the attention.

d. Appearance.

It may sound unreal, but some research indicates that your listeners are more influenced by what they see than what you say. Someone said that only 7 percent of the speaker’s communication comes from words; 38 percent from the manner of speech; and 55 percent from facial expression and bodily movement. Appearance may speak so loudly they cannot hear the message.

Keep your eye on your target. When you look at your audience you share yourself with them. You create a sense of close contact, or friendship and intimacy. Every time you drop your eyes to read, to your audience it feels a little like the sun going behind a cloud.

Dress invisibly. Neatness, good taste, and simplicity should be the rule. If your appearance is either too gaudy or too elegant it can be distracting. Dress invisibly—in a way that your appearance does not distract from your message.

Gesture naturally. The more strongly you feel about the sermon the more you will naturally use gestures to convey your feeling. Don’t overdue them, but be natural and spontaneous. Remember, “A preacher who tries to hide his or her personality will never be an effective preacher.”

Smile. If there is a smile on your face people will try to believe whatever is in your sermon. If you are sour faced the young people may decide they must fight against being a Christian because it might make them like that.

Beware of mannerisms. Be aware that you may unconsciously make meaningless movements in the pulpit that may distract people from concentrating on your sermon. Ask your spouse or a trusted friend to watch for any and tell you what they are. They may include moving your Bible and notes, adjusting your clothing, putting your hand in and out of your pocket, or adjusting your glasses.

e. Transitions.

One of the most awkward moments in preaching can come when we make transition from one part or segment to the next. As

you prepare, settle on a plan for making transitions that fit the sermon most naturally. Options include:

- 1) Numerical—1st, 2nd, 3rd.
- 2) Rhetorical—Repeat the question with each segment.
- 3) Expository—Read the next portion of your text.
- 4) Geographical—state the different places.
- 5) Recapitulate and announce—repeat the lesson of the present segment, show how it teaches the theme, and announce the lesson of your next segment. Usually number 5 is the best.

f. Speak naturally.

As the story goes, someone amazed at the centipede's ability to move all its legs as it walked, asked how he did it. The centipede thought so much about how and when each leg should move that he became confused and couldn't walk at all.

In the pulpit, if you concentrate on your use of words, voice, eye contact and gestures, and all the various aspects of sermon delivery you'll hardly be able to concentrate on your message at all. The time to think about all these things is *before* you preach, not *as* you preach. Begin by using the conversational approach you have always used and feel comfortable with and move forward. God will make you effective as you trust in Him and do your best to constantly improve.

10. Critique.

Your sermon has been preached. No doubt, the Lord has used you. But what has been most and least effective? How could you do better next time? People, wanting to encourage you, will naturally say it was wonderful, but just believing them is not the best way to grow. To grow there needs to be preaching, evaluation, preaching, evaluation, etc. Here are some ways to get an accurate, honest evaluation:

a. Partner evaluation.

Spouse. He or she can sit on the outside aisle making notes of what does and does not seem effective and discuss it with you

along with an evaluation of your mannerisms, gestures, voice variation, emphasis, etc.

Group. Ask a friend to meet with a heterogeneous group around a table with a tape recorder after the sermon. The person should involve all in the discussion of these five suggested questions:

1. What did the sermon say?
2. What difference will it make in your everyday life?
3. What was the strongest thing about the sermon?
4. What was the weakest thing about the sermon?
5. What idea about preaching would you most like to share?

If the group does poorly on #1, your theme didn't grab them. If they hesitate on #2, perhaps it wasn't practical enough. Probably they will be hesitant to say anything negative about your sermon, but will say more on #5. Later, listen to the tape with your spouse or an insightful friend.

Congregation. A congregation is reluctant to critique a sermon, but here is a way to discover what your listeners learned and at the same time contribute to their worship experience. At the close of the sermon ask them to quietly question what they believe the Holy Spirit wanted to teach them that day. Then ask them to write down the sermon thought that would be most helpful to them in the following week. This will tell you much about your preaching.

b. Personal evaluation.

Allow a little time for the sermon to "cool" and then listen to a tape of the sermon. Grade it. You may mark an A, B, or C on the segments. If you want to preach this sermon again you will want to rework those portions with less than an A grade.

c. Preserving everything.

Write down everything you have learned. Write on the sermon what you've decided would improve it, the sources you used, the date and place preached, and the length. File it with your 3x5's for later use.

Remember, preaching and the preaching event is an encounter of the divine and the human in which God speaks, the Son comes alive, and the Holy Spirit illumines so that the preacher and the congregation both hear from God and are transformed. God will richly bless and use you as you work diligently with Him in sermon preparation and delivery.⁹

Endnotes

¹ Adapted from R. Clifford Jones, *Preaching With Power*; General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Ministerial Association, 2005.

² See Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 98.

³ Ellen G. White *Gospel Workers*, p. 99.

⁴ Ellen G. White *Conflict & Courage*, p. 10.

⁵ Ellen G. White Letter 47:1886.

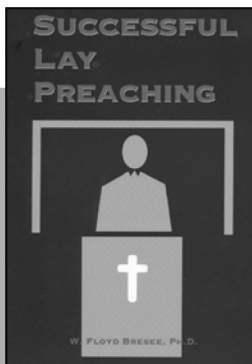
⁶ *Review and Herald*, June 3, 1902.

⁷ *Testimonies*, vol. 2, p. 615.

⁸ *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 335.

⁹ *Successful Lay Preaching*, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Ministerial Association, 1997.

Keys to Sermon Preparation was adapted from *Successful Lay Preaching*, published by the General Conference Ministerial Association. To purchase this book, visit the Ministerial Resource Center at www.ministerialassociation.com.



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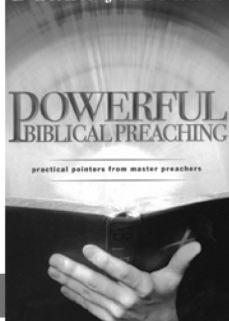
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