

How do they do that?

One of my favorite childhood books was “How do they do that?” The Discovery Channel took the same idea and made it into a TV program called “How do they do it?” The Internet has its own howstuffworks.com. These and other similar books, programs, and websites tap into our natural human curiosity. We want to know what lies behind the surface, what led up to the discovery, what makes what.

This e-book is a “How do they do that?” about preaching. If it was a website, we would call it howsermonswork.com. I’ve written for four audiences. First, it’s for seminary students who want a short practical guide on how to prepare and preach a sermon. They will read the classic books on preaching theory and practice as they continue their studies, but their “practice preaching” class is looming and they desperately need a helping hand to get started. Here it is.

Second, the book is for elders. The material was originally prepared to help the elders in my last congregation. There were a number of churches without pastors in the area, resulting in many preaching requests coming to these men. I wanted to give them a simple step-by-step guide to help them prepare sermons in an efficient, enjoyable, and edifying way. I’ve expanded the material since then, but I hope this short book will help other elders in similar positions become more “apt to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2).

Third, I hope that even experienced preachers might pick up a crumb or two by reading this brief “refresher.”

But, perhaps above all, I want non-preachers to read the book. Given that the most important hours in a Christian’s week are the 1-2 hours they spend listening to their pastor’s sermons, I find it surprising how few Christians are interested in “how do they do that?”

Some people seem to think that pastors “receive” their messages direct from God. They imagine some mysterious process by which the pastor just “gets” a sermon. That is too high a view of preaching. It makes preaching more for angels than for ordinary mortals. I want to show that, just like any other work, there is a reasonable and logical method and system to follow.

Others think that a pastor just spends the week relaxing, gets up on a Sunday, and says the first thing that comes into his mind with little or no forethought or planning. That is too low a view of preaching. Anyone with a bit of verbal fluency could do it. I want to demonstrate that behind the 30-45 minutes you see and hear on a Sunday morning are many hours of mental, spiritual, and practical labor. Like all pastoral labor, it involves head, heart and hand.

If you want to increase respect for your pastor and his preaching, ask “How do they do that?” Then read this ebook and find out the answer.



David P. Murray

Professor of Old Testament and Practical Theology.

[Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary](#), Grand Rapids MI.

For daily blog on servant leadership visit [Head Heart Hand](#)

Organization (I)

The principles of sermon organization

Introduction

In the previous chapter we studied sermon introductions, which we likened to the roots of a tree. We would now like to look at the trunk, the main body of the sermon. Homiletics teachers give this various names: the division, the development, the argument, the treatment, the proof, or the discussion.

I am assuming here that the work of textual exegesis has already been done (see chapter 3). What we are concerned with now is the organizing of the resulting material.

In this chapter we will examine the principles of sermon organization. In the next chapter we will look at the practice of sermon organization. In other words, we will look at the theory and then at a number of practical examples.

The Principles

1. Structured

The preacher is described as, “a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). This means that a major part of the preacher’s task is to divide the word of God into appropriate blocks of material. His sermons should have a plan or a structure. This means that the main block of sermon material will be divided into two or more smaller and distinct blocks of material which are then presented in logical sequence.

Sometimes this plan will be obvious before the preacher even begins to question the text. Sometimes it will arise as he works on it, and sometimes it will only arise after the work of exegesis is completed. In sermon preparation, the preacher should be constantly seeking a structure. And even when one emerges, the question should be, “Is this the best one?” The preacher must be prepared to dispense with his initial structure if another emerges which better presents the subject.

The major benefit of structure, apart from helping the preacher to present his material, is that it greatly aids retention of the message by the listeners.

2. Simple

Sermon structures ought to be as simple as possible, with as few divisions as possible. Many sermons have suffered from over-elaborate analysis and an over-multiplication of divisions and sub-divisions, making them more like lectures than sermons. Multiple divisions tend to attract attention more to the structure of the message rather than to the message itself. They also tend to over-tax the memory and make the listening exercise more mind-centered than heart-centered, more cerebral than spiritual.

What is the ideal number of divisions? There is no hard and fast rule, but three is generally thought to be the most effective for listeners as it presents the material with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Minute division of a text, or unnecessary elaboration of points that are obvious, serve no purpose if preaching is to be useful and edifying. Hearers will be either annoyed at the unnecessary minutiae, or despondent that they cannot remember the divisions and sub-points. It is an interesting observation that some of the greatest sermons are deceptively simple in design and development. Simplicity in design, organization and development is the mark of a great communicator. Complexity confounds – simplicity satisfies.

- James W. Alexander



3. Striking

The preacher should strive to ensure that his headings are fresh and striking. Vividness and variety should be the aim so that the hearer's attention will be immediately aroused.



So many sermons follow the beaten track, in which we can see all that is coming, as to make it a weary task even for devout hearers to listen attentively. One feels inclined to utter a plaintive cry, 'Worthy brother, excellent brother, if you could only manage to drive us sometimes over a different road, even if much less smooth, even if you do not know it very well – I am so tired of this!'

- John Broadus

4. Stated

There has been much debate over how much of the theme or subject should be stated at the beginning of a sermon. Some of the older writers argue for a concise statement of the sermon subject before beginning the sermon proper. This is a short phrase or sentence which contains the proposition of the sermon and will usually reflect the structure. It may be long or short, logical or rhetorical. It may be framed as an indicative, an imperative, an exhortation, or an interrogative. Whether the preacher states this openly at the beginning of his sermon, it is important that the preacher himself is able to encapsulate the point of his sermon in such a proposition for his own benefit in both preparation and delivery. He should be asking, "What is it that I am trying to achieve here today?" "What is my purpose?"

The preacher must have one main subject of discourse, to which he adheres with supreme reference throughout. But this is not enough. He must, second, propose to himself one definite impression on the hearer's soul, to the making of which everything in the sermon is bent... Unity of discourse requires, then, not only singleness of a dominant subject, but also singleness of practical impression. To secure the former see to it that the whole discussion may admit of reduction to a single proposition. To secure the latter, let the preacher hold before him, through the whole preparation of the sermon, the one practical effect intended to be produced upon the hearer's will."

- Robert L. Dabney

Another question arises over whether the sermon divisions should be announced at the beginning. Most homiletics teachers would say that the general answer is, “No.” The argument is that pre-announcement removes the element of surprise and precludes spontaneity. It also might encourage some to switch-off if they wrongly conclude from the headings that the sermon is not for them.

The only occasions when pre-announcement might be desirable is when the train of thought is especially difficult to follow and a preview of the structure will help to follow it; or when it is especially important for the successive steps in an exposition to be noted; or when it is judged that pre-announcement will awaken interest rather than diminish it.

On the whole, though, I agree with Shedd who thought that animated re-capitulation at the end of the sermon is better than dry pre-announcement at the beginning.



The proper image of rhetorical unity is not found in the star which scatters its rays on every side from one point of light, to be absorbed and lost in the darkness of space, but in the lens which collects many parallel or even dissentient rays into one burning focus.

- Robert L. Dabney

5. Smooth

There should be movement or progress in the structure. People must feel that they are moving towards the flowers and fruit at the top of the tree. The movement from point to point should not be irregular and illogical and neither should there be significant interruptions, pauses,

and gaps in the argument. The parts should fit well together “like well-cut stones which need no cement.” Each should grow out of the latter by natural development. Ease of transition will be in proportion to the study expended. If the transition is difficult we should ask if our arrangement is correct. Or we may be trying to work in some idea which has no place in the sermon.

Three detached sermonettes do not make one sermon; but, on the other hand, a handful of observations tied together by a text are not an organic whole. It all depends on whether the heads advance, ascend, cumulate, or are independent, disconnected, parallel. Heads are either watertight compartments, in which case you cannot pass from one to the other, and are exasperated by the iron door, or they are floors of a tower, in which case one will not halt till he reaches the top, because with every fresh ascent he gets a wider view

- John Watson

In general, negatives should precede positives, the abstract should precede the concrete, generals should precede specifics, instruction and conviction should precede appeal.

6. Symmetrical

This does not mean every part is the same size, although gross imbalance should be avoided as it suggests that we have not divided our matter properly. What this does mean is that each part should reflect the symmetry of the text. The divisions should all sustain the same kind of relation to the subject. Sometimes a preacher may have divisions which are branches of the trees and others are but branches of branches.

7. Spoken

The divisions must be suited to spoken announcement. Logical divisions may help in preparation, but the preacher is a speaker and should bear in mind the difference between logical and rhetorical divisions. This is why alliterative headings are often to be aimed at. Or, if not headings with the same letter, then aim to have headings of the same length or rhythm.

8. Separate

Divisions should not overlap but should be set forth as distinctly as possible. When one thought may legitimately be given in either of two divisions, decide which is the best and stick to it

9. Spiritual

When we say that sermon structures should be spiritual we are saying that the sermon material should be organized throughout with a spiritual intent – with the aim of doing spiritual good. This means that application should not be left to the end of the sermon, leaving the main part of the sermon as an arid waste of mere facts and information.

In order to do good by preaching, the attention of the audience must be gained and kept up; and some impression made on their feelings.

- James W. Alexander



The Word should be applied to the hearers in a relevant way throughout. Application will gain interest for the information, which then in turn deepens the force of the appeal.

The successive waves of emotion may thus rise higher and higher to the end. And besides, while thought produces emotion, it is also true that emotion reacts upon and quickens thought, so that impressive application of one division may secure for the next a closer attention."

- John Broadus



10. Scriptural

Although this is really the most important point of all, we put it last for emphasis. In general, the sermon structure will arise obviously from the text of Scripture.

Ideally, sermon outlines will arise out of a text, after careful study of the context and meaning of the passage to be preached upon. Care must be taken not to impose an outline on a text that does not arise naturally from the text.

- James W. Alexander



Conclusion

We can learn to structure sermons by examining the sermons of the best preachers, by having our own structures critiqued by other preachers, and also by the study of logic.

References

James W. Alexander, *Thoughts on Preaching*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 104, 96, 103.

John Broadus, *The Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co, 1929), 278, 292.

Robert L. Dabney, *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 109, 111

John Watson, *Cure of Souls* (Yale Lectures for 1896), p41f.

Organization (2)

The practice of sermon organization

Introduction

In this lecture we will take some of the principles of organization introduced in the previous study and put them into practice. We will look at various practical ways of organizing our sermons.

The Practice

1. Nouns

Perhaps the easiest and most obvious structure is based upon the subjects in the verse or passage being studied.

Examples

Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost (Lk. 15:6).

1. The sheep's lostness
2. The shepherd's love

And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head (Luke 7:44 ff).

1. The sinner
2. Simon
3. The Savior

2. Adjectives

The preacher may also use various adjectives to describe a person, an event, or an occasion in the text.

Who is on the Lord's side? (Ex. 32:26).

1. A clear question
2. An important question
3. An urgent question
4. A divisive question

3. Verbs

Another approach is to organize the sermon around the verbs found in the text.

Wilt thou not revive us again: that thy people may rejoice in thee (Ps. 84:6).

1. A reviving
2. A rejoicing

He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy (Prov. 28:13).

1. Covering sin
2. Confessing sin

4. Questions

A sermon can be structured around the questions which may be asked of the text.

Seek ye the Lord while he may be found (Isa. 55:6).

1. What is missing?
2. Why should I search for this?
3. Where should I search?
4. When should I search?
5. How should I search?
6. Who is to search?

5. Imperatives

If a text contains commands, then the sermon can easily be arranged around these commands.

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen (Matt. 28:19-20).

1. Go
2. Teach
3. Baptize

6. Metaphor

The Bible is rich in metaphors and the suggestive imagery can help the preacher form a structure.

The Lord God is a sun (Ps. 84:11).

Like the sun, God....

1. Is Hot
2. Is Huge
3. Is High
4. Is Here
5. Heals
6. Gives Happiness
7. Hardens

7. Application

Instead of structuring our sermons around our exegesis, we can sometimes structure it around our application and support the application with our exegesis.

And when the Devil had ended all the temptations, he departed from him for a season. And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee (Luke 4:13-14).

1. Temptation comes to the most holy
2. Temptation is a test of faith
3. Temptation is beaten by truth
4. Temptation resisted is rewarded

8. Emotions

The different emotions expressed by Bible characters may provide sermons headings.

Why art thou cast down my soul....hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God" (Ps. 42: 11).

1. A Sad Soul
2. A Smiling Soul

9. Contrasts

Contrasts abound in Scripture and often provide a ready-made "skeleton" for a sermon.

For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones (Isa. 57:15).

1. God is far away in the high and holy heavens
2. God is near in the humble human heart

10. Biography

Sermons on Bible characters may be organized around their various experiences.

And thou his son, O Belshazzar, hast not humbled thine heart ... Then was the part of the hand sent from him; and this writing was written. And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians (Daniel 5:22-28).

1. His sins/folly
2. His scare/fright
3. His sentence/future

11. Responses

The different responses of different people to a situation can also structure a sermon.

The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son. And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come... (Matt. 22:2ff)

The responses:

1. Apathy
2. Activity
3. Aggression
4. Acceptance

Entreat me not to leave thee...(Ruth 1).

1. A grieving widow
2. A leaving widow
3. A cleaving widow

12. Cause and Effect

The effects of certain actions and attitudes can be traced to the original causes.

And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold" (Matt. 24:12).

1. Iniquity abounding
2. Love abating

13. Moral Principles

The preacher may wish to draw out the moral principles latent in a passage and use these as his sermon headings.

Then said Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword (Matt. 26:52)

1. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal but spiritual (2 Cor. 10:4)
2. Blessed are the peacemakers (Matt. 5:9)
3. Whoso sheds man's blood by man shall his blood be shed (Gen. 9:6)
4. Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord (Rom. 12:19)
5. The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost (Lk. 19:10)
6. The word of God is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword (Heb. 4:12)

14. Textual

Sometimes the text will yield an obvious structure.

"Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 6:11).

1. Reckon yourselves dead to sin
2. Reckon yourselves alive to God

15. Past/Present/Future

A number of texts have temporal reference points which can also provide our sermon points.

And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:30-31)

1. The past: Compassion
2. The present: Command
3. The future: Conclusion

16. Before and after

Related to the previous suggestion is the structure founded upon "before" and "after" comparisons.

Lo this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions" (Eccl. 7:29).

1. God's good invention
2. Man's bad invention

17. Causes, Consequences, Cures

The medical approach of cause, consequence, and cure can be used to open up a text and structure a sermon.

The poor shall never cease out of the land (Deut. 15:11).

1. The causes of poverty
2. The consequences of poverty
3. The cure of poverty

18. Question and Answer

A verse or passage may ask and answer a question in such a way that a sermon can be built around.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ...Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors... (Rom. 8:35-37).

1. Question: Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?
2. Answer: Nothing

19. Pairs

A preacher should be on the look out for "pairs."

"Enter ye in at the strait gate..." (Matt. 7:13-14).

1. Two gates
2. Two roads
3. Two destinations

20. Positive and Negative

Truth is often presented negatively and positively.

Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17).

1. Do not trust in uncertain riches
2. Do trust in the certain God

Conclusion

These are just some samples of the many and varied structures by which sermons may be organized. You may want to review your own past sermons' structures in order to identify other alternative organizing methods. You may also want to use the suggestions in this chapter in order to vary your own approach in presenting the truth.