

Biblical Preaching Is Clear in Its Structure ■

not just be accurate, orthodox, thorough, biblical, and exegetical. It must also be warm, loving, full of grace as well as full of truth. If the Word of God brings chastening and rebuke, it needs to be done in the way a father would administer that to a child whom he loved earnestly. People need to be able to see that we care for them, more than we care for our own reputation as preachers. They need to know that what we say comes from the Word of God. But it is almost of equal importance that it evidently comes from our own hearts, and that, like the Chief Shepherd himself, we really would lay down our lives for their sake.

That, of course, implies that we will not simply preach to them. We will pray for them. Like the High Priest, their names will be carved into our hearts. It may seem like moving from the sublime to the ridiculous to say that that is one solution to the problem of remembering people's names. For the biblical preacher, the church roll is not primarily a location finder. It is primarily a prayer list.

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This theme may not in fact be so far removed from the whole area of pastoral concern. If we truly care for people, we will want to break the bread of God down in such a way that they will find no unnecessary obstacles in digesting it.

I think the general principle in this whole matter of structure is that what is not clear to me before I begin to preach will certainly not be clear to anybody else after I have finished. We therefore need to strive for clarity.

I also tend to think that there is a theological reason behind this whole concept of structure. It is that God is a God of order, and not of chaos, and he has left the imprint of that in the universe. He is also a rational God, who reasons with his people in logical form, in order to persuade them. Perhaps

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one might say that Scripture itself bears the marks of its divine origin in this way amongst many others: it reveals both order and reason. And that, of course, is why the structure for which we will strive will most often be present in the text or passage itself.

Again, structure often appears after prolonged meditation. People used to say of Alexander McLaren, the great nineteenth-century biblical expositor, that he had a golden hammer with which he would tap a text and it fell into three divisions. However, it is much more likely that McLaren spent a great deal of time meditating on the text, and the structure and clarity of his address was the product of an enormous amount of hard work.

Of course, structure is not necessarily a series of headings: it can also be a series of logical arguments, as it is in so many of the Epistles. For example, in places like Romans 8, you find Paul asking a number of questions that follow on from each other and making statements that build upon each other. However we do it, I think we will discover that the vast majority of people need pegs on which to hang their thinking. We, on our part, need to take the time and trouble necessary to clarify the truth for them.

There are, however, two things we need to be warned about. The first is that the structure needs to represent the content of the text or passage. It must never be an ill-fitting box into which the truth is thrust, as if we were more concerned with the packaging than with the content. It is very easy for us to try to thrust the truth into headings that we think are particularly striking or well chosen. The structure must represent the truth within the text or passage. In this connection, such aids as alliteration must be servants and never masters.

Accepting these two caveats, we need to work hard at being clear.

A few years ago I was traveling on a plane, and my companion in the seat beside me had a fairly thorough glance at

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the books I was reading. I suppose they immediately identified the work in which I was engaged. He told me that he worshipped in a Presbyterian church every Sunday. It seemed too much of a coincidence not to tell him that I also was a Presbyterian and I was going to a seminary to speak to students for the ministry about preaching. He immediately began to give me some advice: "Do you know what I think is wrong with almost every preacher I hear? I think they spend most of their time preaching to one another and trying to impress one another. Now my dad used to tell me that if you wanted to hear the pure Christian gospel presented so that you would understand it you should go to a Presbyterian church service because that's what they did." Now I have no idea where that man went to church, but I do think that his criticism has at least some validity and should cause most of us preachers to say, "Ouch!" Bishop J. C. Ryle made frequent pleas to the clergy in his Diocese of Liverpool that they should "preach simply."

Apparently, John Wesley read his sermons to a simple, uneducated girl who acted as his maid. On Saturday evenings he asked her to stop him when there was something she could not understand or take in. His motive was a desire for clarity and simplicity.

BIBLICAL PREACHING IS RELEVANT IN ITS APPLICATION

I am told that someone said of Robert Murray McCheyne of Dundee, "He seemed, as his preaching progressed, to advance upon you until he was standing inside your heart, applying the Word of God to all your life."

My own increasing conviction is that this application begins again at our own door. I think the secret of applicatory preaching is that we must apply to ourselves the Word of God while we are meditating upon it, while we are studying it. We