



Preparing to Preach

One of the questions I am most frequently asked about my role as a Pastor is, *'How long does it take you to prepare a sermon?'* Most people are surprised by my answer, *'At least ten hours and often as long as fifteen or even twenty hours.'*

The assumption seems to be that, as with any other task, the person who performs it regularly will be able to complete it quickly – and certainly much more speedily than the occasional 'amateur'.

However, while the trained preacher may have a facility with the Biblical text and languages and a familiarity with the Biblical resources that others lack, none the less the task of sermon preparation is very demanding and time-consuming.

The main reason for this is that preaching is unlike any other task, in that the pastor/preacher is entrusted with the awesome responsibility of presenting God's Word to a congregation – and to the same congregation every Sunday (often morning and evening) for many years.

Such a task, if carried out faithfully and undertaken seriously, can never be a mere mechanical process, but is





10 | FIRM FOUNDATIONS

something living and vital which occupies my thinking and praying (and even sleeping!) moments throughout the week – and not just the ten to twenty hours in the study.

Choosing a subject

The first task of the preacher is deciding which Biblical passage and particular subject to preach on. While the practice of preaching on unrelated topics every week was favoured by famous preachers such as C. H. Spurgeon, the expository preaching method of preaching through a Biblical book or theme has much to commend it – especially in a long-term ministry in the same church.

However, while the topic and passage for each sermon are planned beforehand, considerable thought and prayer is needed before deciding on a series and its relevance to a particular congregation. There is nothing worse than wondering, in week four of a two year series on 1 John, whether you may have made a wrong choice!

The wise pastor knows his congregation and their needs and history, so he chooses his series prayerfully and carefully, often in discussion with others leaders in the church. So, for example, I began my ministry in Charlotte Chapel with a series on the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 1–3 as a diagnostic check-list of the kind of church we were and what the Spirit was saying to this particular church at this specific point in our history.

How long should a series last? This depends partly on the topic or book that is chosen but is also determined by other factors. While many have tried to imitate the practice of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones who spent several years on one New Testament Epistle, I believe that the level of Biblical literacy is so poor these days, that newcomers to the Christian faith need a broader exposure to a whole range of Scripture over a shorter period (added to which very few of us have the ability of the Doctor to sustain such long in-depth series).





It has been our practice in Charlotte Chapel to adopt a particular theme and verse for each year which is usually addressed on Sunday mornings. So, for example, our theme for 1997 was *'Building on the Rock'* – a series of sermons on the Sermon on the Mount with the key verse of Matthew 7:24:

'Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.'

This series of thirty-four messages took the whole year (allowing for special Sundays and seasons) but most series are much shorter – for example, the series on John the Baptist, *'A Voice Crying in the Wilderness'*, which was only six sermons.

We also try to provide a balanced diet for the congregation, often having a series from the Old Testament in the morning and one from the New Testament in the evening, or an evening evangelistic series aimed at seekers, alternating with a morning teaching series directed towards Christians. In this book you will find a sample of these different kinds of series with outlines for each message in the series and the relevant Biblical passage.

So, how do I spend those hours in the study preparing to preach? There is no *'divine blueprint'* but the following is my normal practice. After preaching on Sunday, I take Monday as my day off (a personal Sabbath for rest and renewal). The one or two sermons which have occupied so much thought and effort during the previous week, and have now been discharged, are relegated from the forefront to the background of my thinking – not exactly *'deleted'* but at least placed in the *'recycle bin'*.

So on Tuesday morning I (hopefully) begin with a refreshed mind and a relaxed body – preparing to preach on the chosen passage and topic on the coming Sunday morning or evening – or both. In Charlotte Chapel, we normally have an Assistant Pastor who will preach twice a month which means that I have two Sundays each month when I am only preaching once. This allows me some latitude to do other things in





those weeks – and also to hear God’s Word from someone else on those Sundays. I try to avoid the preacher’s syndrome of speaking elsewhere every time I have a free Sunday and to be as good a listener to others as I hope they are to me.

Groundwork

My first task is groundwork – to familiarise myself with the Biblical passage in order to make sure that I understand what it says and means. To help me do this, I read the text in several different translations ranging from the more literal through to paraphrases (we use the New International Version in Charlotte Chapel). A knowledge of the original languages (Greek and Hebrew) is useful though not essential as there are many excellent commentaries and other resources which define words and meanings.

Commentaries and other books fall into two broad categories. Some major on exegesis – explaining the meaning of the text to those who were its original recipients, often with detailed analysis of words and phrases in the original languages. Others, including books of sermons, focus on application – trying to understand the relevance of the text for us today. Many included both categories but are usually stronger on one than the other.

As I read these books, I make rough notes on anything useful, noting any useful sentences or sections that might be worth quoting directly (if I do so, I always acknowledge the source – out of courtesy and honesty, and also hopefully to encourage others to buy and read the book).

In the introduction to each series in this book, I have listed a few of the books that we found particularly useful. D. A. Carson’s *New Testament Commentary Survey* (IVP:1993) is a useful resource which summarises the strengths and weaknesses of commentaries for the New Testament. And, although he preached over a century ago, I find that Spurgeon’s sermons usually shed fresh light on any given passage.



Building-work

After groundwork, comes building-work – an attempt to put the material into some semblance of order. Although I accept that some hearers and speakers favour a holistic approach to preaching and learning – describing a broad theme and then coming at it from different angles – I am not one of them. I am a linear progressive thinker and preacher and so I find it helpful to analyse the structure of the passage or theme and divide it into several major points (usually anything from two to four or five depending on the topic).

As you will see from the outlines in this book, I try to make these as memorable as possible – using alliteration or balanced phrases, so long as they are not forced. This will also be determined by the type of passage – narrative is very different from discourse, parable from proverb, or Gospel from Epistle. I sometimes struggle to find a good structure and find that sleeping on it is often beneficial.

Application

Perhaps the hardest part of all is application and, rather than spending thirty minutes on explanation and then only the last five minutes on application, I try to include the application as I go along with each major point. However, I usually attempt to isolate one major point which summarises the theme of the passage and which the hearer can take away.

I find that a suitable **title** for the sermon can help to do this. Again, I know that some people, such as Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones did not favour titles, but it is surely significant that the editors of his sermons have given titles to each of them! The title can also arouse interest if it is advertised ahead of time – depending on the choice. A church I visited recently had an attractive leaflet with the sermon topics, but the title for Luke 8:40–48 was *‘Woman with haemorrhage’*! Something more imaginative such as *‘Living with long-term illness’* or *‘Hoping for healing’* might have attracted a wider audience!



Another aid to focusing on the theme is the **opening section** of the sermon. Working on the well-known premise *'If you don't strike oil in the first five minutes, stop boring!'*, I choose with care an opening illustration to catch the listener's attention. This can be drawn from personal experience or from the current news or some topical issue which engages with the hearers.

For example, on one occasion, I was due to speak on the attitude of Jesus to the Sabbath and in that very week I read in the newspaper that the Chief Rabbi in Israel had announced that throwing snowballs on the Sabbath was against the Mosaic law (unless those you threw them at gave their permission!) It made an excellent introduction to Sunday's topic!

Finally, I try to drive the main point home with a **concluding illustration** – sometimes returning to the one with which I began or even adding some further details. A sample sermon is included at the back of this book.

You will see from this sermon that I prepare very full notes from which to preach. When I began preaching in my teens, I prided myself on three points written on the back of an old envelope. As I have got older (and wiser?!) I find that writing out in full helps me to think through what I want to say. I then familiarise myself with the material and use the notes as a prop rather than reading verbatim from them.

Computers

A word about computers which I believe are a brilliant resource for the preacher. First of all, the material in the sermon can be edited and moved around quite readily and easily. Then there are many resources available on computer including commentaries, concordances, maps and lexicons and many Bible versions which can be cut and pasted into the text of the sermon.

Finally, there is the Internet, which has an amazing store of useful information. For example, I was recently preaching



on the theme of *Finishing Well* and wanted to use the famous story of the marathon runner Jim Peters who collapsed just before the finishing line. A simple search on the internet gave all the details of time and place and even photographs! Incidentally, I believe that illustrations gain much greater credibility with the listeners if they are cited accurately.

The sermon outlines included in this book are included in the church bulletin which people receive as they enter the church, and have proved to be popular and useful to most people. One disadvantage with this is that people can see what is coming and so any sense of surprise or anticipation is lost.

One way around this (now adopted by many churches which now have screens installed) is to use PowerPoint for images and/or the main points of the sermon. This is a divisive issue among preachers but I think the benefits outweigh the disadvantages, providing we recognise that preaching is primarily a spoken word rather than a visual image ministry. So I use it to reinforce (not replace) the spoken word, and my rule of thumb is that any who only hears the message (for example, on tape or downloaded) will not miss anything of importance by not seeing the screen.

Preaching – in its style and structure as well as its preparation – is very personal, and I am very aware of this fact as I offer these observations and the series and outlines which follow. However, if an idea for a series or a title for a sermon, or an approach to a passage can be of some help to a fellow preacher, then I hope this book will be worthwhile. While most of these outlines are my own, I am grateful to colleagues who have shared in these sermon series with me and have allowed their outlines to be included in this book – in particular, our former Assistant Pastor, Rev. John Smuts, and my predecessor, Rev. Derek Prime.

Perhaps the greatest beneficiary of the sermon is the preacher himself, for only the message which is first of all



16 | FIRM FOUNDATIONS

addressed and applied to me will carry any real authenticity when preached to others. In order for this to happen, both preacher and hearers need the illumination and help of the Holy Spirit. Without that divine empowering, the most thorough of preparation and most professional of presentation will prove to be mere words. With the Holy Spirit's help, the words of the poorest of preachers can become the very words of God.

For those who may be interested in the spoken sermons behind the outlines in this book, many of them can be downloaded from www.charlottechapel.org or purchased on tape from:

The Tape Ministry, Charlotte Baptist Chapel, West Rose Street, EDINBURGH EH2 4AZ

