

Sermon Planning: *The Use of the Types of Sermons*

For Your Files

by Stafford North

As a preacher plans his sermons, he must decide many things such as the needs of the audience, the Scriptures that can best provide the “medicine” for these needs, and what illustrations will make the needed message “stick.”

Certainly among these important decisions a preacher must make early in his preparation of a sermon is the *type* of sermon he will preach. Some, unfortunately, prepare the sermon and then “tack” a sermon label on it. Deciding on the type of sermon first provides the basis for the sermon’s organizational structure, a very vital aspect of sermon preparation.

I. THE TWO BASIC SERMON TYPES DEFINED

We may think of two fundamental types of sermons: *passage-based* and *subject-based*. Passage-based sermons start with a verse, a group of verses, a chapter, or a book and analyze that passage in a particular way to develop a message to meet the needs of the audience.

Subject-based sermons, on the other hand, begin with a *topic* rather than a passage and focus the teachings of the Scripture from *various* passages on the one subject. Notice that both types are *Scripture-based*, but in one the *passage* is the basis of organization while in the other the *topic* becomes the basis of organization.

Both of these types of sermons have an important place. Certainly it is useful, at times, to preach on such subjects as faith, conversion, conscience, courage, repentance, and the Godhead. On the other occasions, however, one may well build a sermon on 1 Corinthians 13, the Beatitudes, Isaiah 53, Genesis 1:1, or one of many other passages.

No preacher should be without the capacity to preach both types of sermons. As we shall see at the end of this article, each has its own special contribution to make to our work.

II. THE TWO SERMON TYPES AND SERMON ORGANIZATION

Before discussing each of these types of sermons, it will be helpful to comment briefly on the organization of sermons.

All sermons should have a main thrust, a proposition, a thesis, a theme. The preacher should word one sentence that capsules his message. This is the “warhead” which the rest of his sermon seeks to deliver. In a passage-based sermon it may be, simply, the verse he seeks to present. In a sermon on a particular subject, it may be a declaration about that topic. Obviously, the selection of the type of sermon and the wording of the subject sentence are closely related and should be done together.

Once the subject sentence is chosen and worded properly for the type of sermon, the next step in the organization is choosing the main headings. As we shall see in this article, the *type* of sermon chosen is a major factor in this selection of main headings to support the subject sentence. The subject sentence and its supporting main headings, then, constitute the skeleton of the sermon. Once these are set in place, the preacher may “flesh out” the points with explanation, examples, narration, quotations, and other supporting material.

Now let us turn to a study of the two types of sermons.

III. THE PASSAGE-BASED SERMONS ILLUSTRATED

We may divide sermons which begin with one passage into *four sub-types*. All of these start with some section of Scripture, but each treats it in a different way. We shall call these Textual, Expository I, Expository II, and Explained-Exemplified-Applied.

1. *Textual*. A textual sermon has two fundamental characteristics: (1) it treats only one or two verses of Scripture, usually taking some

portion of them as its subject sentence, and (2) it takes *exact words* or *phrases* from those verses as the main headings.

Thus we find in 1 Timothy 4:12, "Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an ensample to them that believe, in word, in manner of life, in love, in faith, in purity." This verse very naturally fits the textual sermon because a subject sentence (or main thrust) is easily seen in the statement, "Be thou an ensample to the believers," and the words or phrases that follow naturally elaborate on this theme as main points. So a textual sermon outline on this verse would look like this.

Subject Sentence: "Be thou an ensample to the believers."

Body:

- I. In word
- II. In manner of life
- III. In love
- IV. In faith
- V. In purity

Each of these points then would be expanded with explanation, other Scriptures, and practical examples of the principle in action.

Another example of a textual sermon could come from Romans 8:28. This familiar verse could be preached textually like this.

Subject Sentence: God works everything for good to the called who love Him.

Body:

- I. All things work together for good
- II. To those who love God and are called according to His purpose

The *first* point would then be expanded to discuss *what* it means for all things to work together for good. This should include examples of this principle at work in the Bible and today. The second point would describe *to whom* God has made this promise. Who are the "called" and who are those who "love God?"

One more example of a textual sermon might come from Genesis 1:1 where each word or phrase of the verse could become a major section of the sermon.

Subject Sentence: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

Body:

- I. "In the beginning"
- II. "God"
- III. "Created"
- IV. "The heavens and the earth"

In each of the above examples, the textual sermon is seen to deal with a short passage (one or two verses), taking the actual words or phrases in those verses as main headings. The subject sentence also may be words directly from the text, the entire short passage, or a summation of it.

2. *Expository I.* We will now turn to expository sermons and describe two types, called simply I and II. Both use the same basic approach to a particular passage, as we shall see. The essential elements of any expository sermon are that: (1) it takes for its subject sentence a *basic theme* that runs through *one passage* of Scripture, usually a paragraph in length, and (2) it takes as its main points what this passage teaches *about that theme*.

In Expository I sermons, the *theme* chosen from a passage is the *fundamental theme which the author would have considered its fundamental thrust*. One of the best-known expository sermons is on 1 Corinthians 13 by Henry Drummond, who took *love* as his theme for this sermon.

Subject Sentence: Love is the greatest thing in the world.

Body:

- I. Because of the importance of love (vv. 1-3)
- II. Because of the nature of love (vv. 4-7)
- III. Because of the endurance of love (vv. 8-13)

A slightly different expository approach to this same chapter and one which makes more use of the context of 1 Corinthians 12-14 is one that considers the contrast between love and spiritual gifts.

Subject Sentence: Love is a "more excellent way" than spiritual gifts.

Body:

- I. Love is more important than spiritual gifts (vv. 1-3).
- II. Love improves one's character more than spiritual gifts (vv. 4-7).
- III. Love outlasts spiritual gifts (vv. 8-13).

For another sample, Peter's sermon in Acts 2 can be preached by making his central theme the subject sentence and then supporting that proposition with his evidence.

Subject Sentence: Jesus is the Christ.

Body:

- I. Jesus is the Christ because He could work miracles (v. 22).
- II. Jesus is the Christ because God raised Him from the dead (vv. 24, 32).
- III. Jesus is the Christ because He fulfilled Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah (vv. 25-35).

Conclusion:

- A. "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly, that God hath made him, both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified" (v. 36).
- B. "Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (v. 38).

Some other samples of expository analysis are as follows:

(1) James 1:2, 3, 12-15.

Subject Sentence: Temptation can be a blessing or a curse.

Body:

- I. The source of temptation is not God but our own lust.
- II. The *response* to temptation may be endurance or sin.
- III. The *outcome* of temptation may be patience or death.

(2) Revelation 20:11-15.

Subject Sentence: At the resurrection

all will face God in judgment.

Body:

- I. God's judgment is certain.
- II. God's judgment is just to some.
- III. God's judgment is merciful to others.
- IV. God's judgment is final.
- V. God's judgment is eternal.

(3) Matthew 6:25-34. An excellent example of the Expository I sermon was developed from Matthew 6:25-34 by R. Lofton Hudson in his book *The Religion of the Sound Mind*.

Subject Sentence: Christ teaches us how to stop worry.

Body:

- I. Value yourself.
(Are ye not of more value than birds and flowers?)
- II. Accept yourself.
(Which of you by being anxious can add one cubit?)
- III. Consecrate yourself.
(Give yourself to a cause—the kingdom of heaven.)

Notice how this sermon takes Jesus' central theme of "be not anxious" and analyzes His own suggestions into three parallel and powerful statements.

(4) Luke 10:30-35. Parables are often used for Expository I sermons as in this example using the story of the Good Samaritan.

Subject Sentence: The story of the Good Samaritan illustrates three philosophies of life.

Body:

- I. The thieves said: "What's yours is mine and I'll take it."
- II. The Priest and the Levite said: "What's mine is mine and I'll keep it."
- III. The Samaritan said: "What's mine is yours and I'll share it."

3. *Expository II*. Now let us turn to Expository II sermons. Here the *analysis* is quite similar, but, instead of using the *fundamental* theme of the passage, one takes as the subject sentence a secondary theme or even a theme not mentioned in

the passage but which can be illuminated by the passage.

In Acts 2:1-13, for example, the central theme is the coming of the Holy Spirit. One might develop an *Expository I* sermon along that fundamental theme by speaking on (1) the *promise* of the Spirit (1:5-8, 2:16-21), (2) the *appearance* of the Spirit (2:1-4), and (3) the *results* of the Spirit (2:12).

But an *Expository II* sermon might take a *secondary* theme of that passage such as *speaking in tongues*. Since this is the only detailed description we have of a tongue-speaking occasion, we may ask what we can learn here about speaking in tongues.

Subject Sentence: The tongue-speaking on Pentecost can teach us some very important lessons about what tongue-speaking was.

Body:

- I. Those who spoke in tongues were empowered by the Holy Spirit.
- II. Those who spoke in tongues were speaking known languages they had not learned.
- III. Those speaking in tongues were performing a sign to prove their new message was from God.

Another sample of an *Expository II* sermon comes from Acts 6. Here the main thrust is dealing with the problem of the Grecian widows. But a secondary theme is "church management."

Subject Sentence: The occasion of the first church dissension teaches us about church management.

Body:

- I. The apostles were aware of what the congregation thought and felt.
- II. The apostles worked out a plan to present to all the people.
- III. The apostles involved the people in solving the problem.
- IV. The apostles delegated to others what they could.
- V. The apostles continued to do what their own priorities demanded.

Another example of an *Expository II* sermon can be found in Romans 12:9-21. Here we find a list of admonitions for all Christians. These can be used in a special way, however, by taking the theme of elders, husbands, wives, employers, teachers, or children through this list. While the main thrust clearly makes this passage for all Christians, it takes on a special meaning when applied to Christians in particular situations. So when used as a subject sentence, the sermon is classified as *Expository II*.

Subject Sentence: Paul gives excellent advice to husbands and wives in Romans 12:9-13.

Body:

- I. Let your love be pure.
- II. Reject evil in your home while holding fast to good.
- III. Work in your family roles with diligence.
- IV. Be patient with one another, even in tribulation.
- V. Be helpful to others through service and hospitality.

We have, then, spoken of two similar but slightly different types of expository sermons. Both take a passage of about a paragraph (or possibly a short chapter) in length. This passage is chosen because it has one central theme about which several significant points can be made.

Having selected either the fundamental or a secondary theme to build around, the preacher then identifies the important and useful points which *that passage* makes about the theme.

4. *Explained-Exemplified-Applied*. A fourth type of passage-based sermon is called *Explained-Exemplified-Applied*. It takes as its subject sentence a verse or phrase from the Bible which presents some *principle* or doctrine and then examines that principle or doctrine under three headings: (1) explained, (2) exemplified, and (3) applied.

The verse or phrase chosen as the subject sentence might, for example, urge the congregation to follow a principle such as, "It is more blessed to give than to receive," or "Evil companions corrupt good morals." In the first point of the sermon, the preacher *explains* this principle by definitions, elaboration, or clarification.

Under the *second* heading, he gives “examples” from the Bible of this principle in action in people’s lives. And in the *third* heading, the preacher “applies” the principle to circumstances in which the members of his audience may find themselves. Here are some samples of Explained-Exemplified-Applied sermons.

Subject Sentence: The love of money is a root of all evil.

Body:

- I. “The love of money is a root of all evil” explained
- II. “The love of money is a root of all evil” exemplified
 - A. Balaam illustrates this principle.
 - B. Lot illustrates this principle.
 - C. The rich farmer of Jesus’ parable illustrates this principle.
 - D. Judas illustrates this principle.
- III. “The love of money is a root of all evil” applied
 - A. Remember this principle when you choose a job.
 - B. Remember this principle when you have an opportunity to help others.
 - C. Remember this principle when you give to the Lord.

Another example of this type of sermon is found in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

Subject Sentence: “Whosoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

Body:

- I. “Turn the other cheek” explained
 - A. What this principle means is
 - B. What this principle does not mean is
- II. “Turn the other cheek” exemplified
 - A. Abraham’s dealing with Lot illustrates this principle.
 - B. David’s dealing with Saul illustrates this principle.
- III. “Turn the other cheek” applied
 - A. When someone speaks unkindly to you, turn the other cheek.
 - B. When someone neglects you, turn the other cheek.

- C. When someone treats you unfairly, turn the other cheek.

In summary, the passage-based sermons, then, always start with a particular passage in mind and develop that passage in some way. The *textual* sermon uses the actual wording of the verse or phrase. The *expository* sermon analyzes for a theme and what the passage says about that theme. The *explained-exemplified-applied* sermon looks for a principle embodied in a passage and then explains it, gives biblical examples of the principle in action, and then applies the principle to everyday life.

Now let us turn from passage-based sermons to the other major type—subject-based.

IV. THE SUBJECT-BASED SERMONS ILLUSTRATED

Subject-based sermons, unlike those which are passage-based, do not begin with some particular verse or passage in view; rather, they begin with a *topic* or *theme*. They focus Scriptures from all parts of the Bible on one central message. The main headings in such a sermon do not, of course, come from analyzing a verse or passage, but from *analyzing the subject*. There are many forms which this analysis and the resulting major divisions may take, but the most common are listed below.

1. *Narration With Application*. A very simple yet effective type of topical sermon is “narration with application” in which the preacher chooses *some Bible story as the subject* of his discourse and *relates the story in considerable detail*. The *narration* is followed with *applications* of the lessons of the story to current problems. One may, for example, tell the story of Elijah at Mount Carmel, supplying the important historical, geographical, and cultural details along with the biblical narrative. Following this, the preacher can make useful applications to practical living.

Subject Sentence: Elijah’s confrontation with the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel contains great lessons for us.

Body:

- I. Narration
- II. Application
 - A. Elijah had faith to stand.

- B. Elijah's dependence upon prayer exhibits the ultimate power at the disposal of the Christian.
- C. Elijah's sudden flight from Jezebel indicates that even the strongest among us is subject to temptation.

While the Bible is filled with stories which are suitable for such treatment, care should be taken to find narratives which have an emotional climax for interest and which have ample opportunity for applications to life situations today. The story of David's sin and Nathan's visit, the story of Esther, the conversion of Saul—these and a host of others are excellent.

This type of preaching is simple. But since almost every person, young and old, enjoys a good story, the "narration with application" sermon can be quite effective. The secret of good story-telling, which is essential in this kind of preaching, lies in finding the proper balance between including sufficient specific details for interest and information while avoiding slow, ponderous movement.

In this type of sermon, the *narration* portion is usually the first division of the body and the *application* portion the second. A short narration might, however, be the introduction with each application becoming a main point.

2. *Logical*. Another "pattern" along which the preacher may cut his subject sentence into main headings may be termed the "logical approach." While this should not be taken to imply that other methods are illogical, this pattern places particular emphasis upon logical relationships. Particularly good for the sermon to convince, the "logical" type of division usually gives reasons *why*. A preacher might, for example, state as his proposition: "All Christians should study the Bible daily." His main headings would present the reasons *why* this thesis should be accepted. Here is another sample.

Subject Sentence: I am glad to be a Christian.

Body:

- I. Because being a Christian gives me a reason for life
- II. Because being a Christian gives me a guide for life

- III. Because being a Christian gives me a hope for life hereafter

Another style of the logical pattern is one in which each point is built upon the preceding one.

Subject Sentence: The Christian should give proper time each day for spiritual growth.

Body:

- I. If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature.
- II. The first step in becoming this new creature is the new birth.
- III. The next step in being this new creature is Christian growth.
- IV. To make this growth possible, the Christian must keep the spiritual and the physical in proper balance in his thinking and living.
- V. This balance can be achieved only when the Christian allows proper time in his life for the spiritual as well as the physical.

This type of sequence the logicians call "chain reasoning" and each link becomes a main point of the speech.

3. *Parties Involved*. Sermons may often be built around those *persons or groups, called "parties,"* involved in a given situation. One may, for instance, speak on the love of God and demonstrate with His love to Abraham, His love to the children of Israel, and His love to Christians. A preacher may also select certain key figures in some biblical, historical, or current episode around whom to build his sermon. The story of the curing of Naaman's leprosy, for example, provides the framework for a lesson of this type.

- I. The maid remembered God.
- II. Elisha served God.
- III. Naaman obeyed God.
- IV. Gehazi left God.

A study of the crucifixion can be viewed from the standpoint of the parties involved: the Jewish leaders, the mob, the soldiers, the thieves, and Christ. The birth of Jesus, likewise, may be seen through the eyes of the shepherd, the wise

men, the parents, and King Herod.

4. *Time*. Still another method of dividing the body of the sermon is according to time. The most common division of this type is "*past, present, and future*," and variations of this approach. Simon the sorcerer, for example, may be studied before his conversion, at his conversion, and after his conversion. The beginning of the church, likewise, may be seen in prophecy and fulfillment. The life of a congregation, in the first or twentieth century, may be considered in its past, present, and future.

Other variations of the time pattern involve a sequence of historical dates or events. The life of Moses may be divided into three forty-year periods, and the life of David can be divided into his childhood, his flight from Saul, and his kingship. Similarly, the history of the exile may be partitioned into the deportation to Babylon, the events of the captivity, and the return from Babylon.

5. *Space*. On certain occasions a subject may also be approached from a *geographical* perspective. The ministry of Jesus is commonly divided into the Judean ministry, the Galilean ministry, and the Perea ministry; and almost every preacher and teacher has divided a lesson by rivers, lakes, or mountains. The mission work of Paul, the growth of the church, and the wandering of the Israelites also lend themselves to this type of division.

6. *Analysis*. Many topics fall into certain natural divisions. Government naturally involves the legislative, the judicial, and the executive, while strokes in tennis are forehand, backhand, and serve. Many religious topics, likewise, may be *analyzed into their natural parts*. Some topics are sin, forgiveness, redemption, justification, repentance, conscience. As one delves into the nature of such topics, he finds certain central aspects which become the main points of a sermon. A sermon on the subject of the conscience, for example, could be developed like this.

Subject Sentence: The Bible teaches us of three states of the conscience.

Body:

- I. A pure conscience
- II. A weak conscience
- III. A defiled conscience

One also may analyze a topic such as "How the Jerusalem Church Grew" in this way—a working church, a praying church, a giving church, a unified church. Paul's statement that we must "overcome evil with good" may be analyzed into such headings as: overcome hate with love; overcome pride with humility; overcome idleness with service.

7. *Biographical*. Many preachers like to take a biographical approach to a sermon by considering the life of some great Bible character or historical figure. Such sermons are usually divided by either the great events or the great qualities in his life.

Subject Sentence: Abraham was a man of great faith.

Body:

- I. Abraham first showed his faith by leaving Ur to go to a land which God would show him (Genesis 12).
- II. Abraham also showed his faith in solving the trouble with Lot over the land (Genesis 13).
- III. Abraham also showed faith in offering his son Isaac (Genesis 22).

A biographical sermon on Paul might point to the qualities which made him great: he admitted his mistakes; he applied himself diligently to whatever he was doing; he never violated his conscience.

8. *Analogy*. Some sermons are actually an *extended analogy* or *comparison*, and, of course, the Bible is replete with possibilities for such sermons. Paul compares the exodus from Egypt and entry into the promised land to the Christian's exit from the bondage of sin, living in the wilderness, and finally crossing the Jordan into the promised land of heaven (1 Corinthians 10). Sermons can be built on the church as the body, the bride, the kingdom, and the family.

Subject Sentence: The church is the family of God.

Body:

- I. God, the Father, is the Head.
- II. Christ, the Elder Brother, is our example.
- III. We, as children, support each other.

Christian living is frequently compared with running, walking, fighting, laboring. In this type of sermon, the points of comparison become the main points of the sermon.

Subject Sentence: Paul compares the Christian life to running a race.

Body:

- I. Runners must train.
- II. Runners must strive.
- III. Runners receive a prize.

9. *Problem-Solution*. Obviously, this type of sermon is built upon some problem, either theological or practical, with various solutions being proposed and the best usually being determined. The commonly given steps in solving a problem are of some help in developing a sermon in this vein, but should not be slavishly followed: becoming aware of a problem, locating and defining the problem, exploring possible solutions to the problem, determining the best possible solution, securing acceptance for this solution.

In some cases, *the discussion of the problem will be the first major point in the body, while the presentation of the solution is the second*. In other cases the presentation of the problem will be handled in the introduction, and the entire body will be given to examining the solution or solutions.

Some theological questions which might be handled in this fashion are: (1) Which translation is best? (2) Is salvation by faith only? (3) What is the nature and work of the Holy Spirit? (4) Was Christ raised from the dead? Practical problems would include: (1) Should a Christian kill for his government? (2) What does the Bible teach about divorce and remarriage?

10. *Motivated Sequence*. A number of speech teachers have devised specialized plans for developing a topic. Probably the best-known of these is Professor Alan Monroe's "motivated sequence." Departing from the usual introduction, body, and conclusion, he suggests five points for the entire speech: *attention, need, satisfaction, visualization, action*.

In this plan one must: first center the *attention* of the audience upon the general theme; second, make them sense a *need* or problem which demands action; third, show how this need can be *satisfied* through a proposed solution; fourth,

make the audience *visualize* themselves with the solution in operation; and finally, call for the *action* necessary for adoption.¹ This pattern starts by painting a dark picture which makes the audience cry out for something to be done and then, shows them the light.

- I. Great Bible characters were often not good parents. (Attention)
- II. None of us want to fail as a parent. (Need)
- III. To succeed as parents we must use all the resources at our disposal. (Satisfaction)
- IV. Just imagine how you will enjoy seeing your children as faithful Christians. (Visualization)
- V. Here are some things we parents should do now. (Action)

CONCLUSION

Here is how a preacher might use his knowledge of these various sermon patterns in developing a sermon.

Suppose he has decided that a need in the congregation is for more home Bible study. So he thinks through various possible *passage-based* sermons: a *Textual* sermon on Deuteronomy 6:4-9 taking particular phrases about how the Israelites were to train their children; a *Textual* sermon on Ephesians 6:4 about fathers nurturing their children with (I.) chastening and (II.) admonition; an *Expository I* sermon on 1 Peter 1:22-2:5 about (I.) God's word is an incorruptible seed for a spiritual birth and (II.) God's word is spiritual milk for spiritual growth; and a *passage-based* sermon on "nurturing" explained, "nurturing" exemplified, "nurturing" applied. He also thinks of possible *subject-based* sermons such as one dealing with the Parties Involved: (I.) Samuel's children, (II.) Saul's children, (III.) David's children.

Now with these possibilities in mind, the preacher can select what he believes will best achieve his purpose with this particular audience and then proceed to other steps of developing the sermon.

It is unnecessary to try to place one type of sermon above another. Each has its own particular place of usefulness. Certainly no preacher will want to use one to the entire exclusion of

another. There has, however, been a general neglect of good expository preaching and it should occupy a more prominent place in the work of most preachers. It has the advantage of keeping the Scriptures to the forefront while allowing many practical applications.

All preachers must learn to use the sermon types well if they are to have success in the pulpit.

FOOTNOTE

¹Alan H. Monroe, *Principles and Types of Speech*, 3d ed. (New York: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1949), Chapter 16.

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