

# Preaching Made Practical

by

*O. Palmer Robertson*



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To my Sister and my Brothers

Nell Robertson Chinchin  
Jack “Bouncer” Robertson  
L. Taylor Robertson

With thanks to the LORD  
for the bonds of family love in Christ  
that have kept us united across the continents,  
and with appreciation for all you have done  
to encourage me in my ministry in Africa.



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## Foreword

**M**ore than ever the Christian church needs a new generation of men committed to the urgent necessity of preaching God's word and who are gifted themselves to preach that word. This is easier said than done. Paul's command to Timothy to 'preach the word, in good times and in bad times' (2 Timothy 4:2), inevitably raises the question, 'How is this to be done?'

With his latest book, O Palmer Robertson has provided the church with a timely, detailed, engaging, relevant and convicting exposition of what it means to 'preach the word'. *Preaching Made Practical* explores what it means to be a faithful, God honouring and Christ magnifying preacher. Dr Robertson discusses what a sermon is not and what a sermon is. He considers the person of the preacher. He details how to go about choosing a text. He helpfully, from many years of experience, anatomises the constituent elements of a Bible-based, God-focused, Christ-centred sermon.

*Preaching Made Practical* could well become the standard text used in Seminaries and Bible Colleges to help equip men become preachers of the word. It could also provide basic training in preaching for those who have not had an opportunity for formal instruction. At the same time, it could serve as a “refresher course” for those who have been at the glorious task of preaching for many years. No book on preaching, however excellent, can make a man a preacher. However, a good book on preaching can be an instrument in God’s hands to help in the training of men to become preachers.

*Preaching Made Practical* is a must read for any man seriously considering the Christian ministry. Churches and Seminaries will want to ensure that their young men read and digest its practical and deeply spiritual wisdom.

**Rev. Dr. Ian Hamilton, Pastor**  
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## Introduction

**T**he significance of preaching cannot be overestimated. Today its importance is regularly underestimated. Once a “big man” in a denomination told a church planter, “Preaching will never start a church.” But the church planter preached. At times the congregation shrunk to only two widow women. But they were praying women. God, through the instruments of prayer and preaching got that church started. Within ten years that little church had sent missionaries to four different continents, and all of them were preachers. Forty years later, that church is still going strong. To God be the glory for the power of his preached Word.

The importance of preaching cannot be exaggerated, whether the sermon be directed to a large, metropolitan congregation or to a small village church with a thatched roof and walls only waist high with goats wandering in and out. It is the “foolishness of preaching” that God has ordained for the saving of this world, and that is what the text says (1 Corinthians 1:18). Indeed, the preaching that saves must clearly articulate the gospel of the cross,

which many modern translations of this passage emphasize. But the fact remains: it is the preaching of the gospel that serves as God's instrument for people's salvation. If God has called you to preach, don't dare do anything else. Just think about some of the important things about preaching:

1. Preaching is vital for the health and even the very existence of the church. It is one of the tell-tale, indispensable marks of the church. Something happens to people and communities when they sit under the preaching of the Word of God, something that never happens any other time or by any other instrument. As the Scriptures themselves emphasize:

Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ ... And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? (Romans 10:17, 14).

God has ordained the foolishness of preaching ... (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction (2 Timothy 4:2).

Never belittle preaching. If you are a preacher, be a preacher! In good Calvinistic fashion, give it all you've got. Incidentally, isn't it strange the way it works? The person who really believes in the sovereignty of God in all things—he's the one who puts in more effort than anyone to complete the work God calls him to do. So if you believe in God's sovereignty and he has called you to be an evangelist, then give your every effort to calling all men everywhere to

repent! Urge them, plead with them to turn from their sin and trust in Christ. God is not going to repent for them, but he commands them to do so. The Holy Spirit will not believe for them, though he will enable them to do so. God has told you to “command all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). So preach it!

2. Preaching is a key to revival. The world constantly needs revival, the renewal that comes only with the fullness of a life-changing relation to God. Revival must begin with God’s people, not with the world:

If MY people who are called by MY name shall humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land (2 Chronicles 7:14).

But how will God’s people ever understand their desperate need to humble themselves and pray, seek God’s face and turn from their wicked, wicked ways? Someone must tell them—straight out! You must boldly declare their sin to them. You must preach in the boldness of the Spirit according to the truth of God’s word. Says the prophet Isaiah:

Shout it aloud,  
do not hold back.  
Raise your voice  
like a trumpet.  
Declare to my people  
their rebellion  
and to the house of Jacob  
their sins (Isaiah 58:1).

Many leaders among God's people emphasize the importance of personal evangelism. They encourage people to practice "friendship evangelism." God's people often keep looking for an opportunity to eventually share the gospel with their friends.

All methods of sharing the gospel are good. Remember the old saying? "I like the way I do evangelism better than the way you don't do evangelism."

But God has ordained the "foolishness of *preaching*" as the means of salvation for many lost sinners. I was saved that way, and continually meet people who have had the same experience.

Preachers today have lost faith in the power of the preached Word as God's appointed instrument for saving people. So they very rarely preach in a way that specifically addresses lost sinners with the expectation that some will be saved. They may be faithfully declaring God's Word. But they do not address their message toward the goal of the conversion of sinners. So why should they be surprised when no one is saved through their preaching?

Preachers must preach with the expectation that people will be converted. Often open air evangelism provides the opportunity for preaching directed toward the salvation of souls. In the market place or in a tent a person may preach evangelistically. But a great need exists for evangelistic preaching in the church. Many people come to church out of habit. But they don't know Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. So the preacher must preach evangelistically in the church, expecting that people will be



converted. How important is preaching if it is a major way for people to be saved!

3. God is glorified when his truth is proclaimed whether people believe it or not. Paul the Apostle said:

For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the stench of death; to the other the fragrance of life (2 Corinthians 2:15–16).

In some cases people who hear the preached Word will be saved from a life of sin that leads to death. But in other cases people will strongly resist or even contradict the truth. But whether or not they believe the gospel as it is being preached, God is glorified. One of these days, when the time for the final judgment comes, people who have heard the gospel preached but have not believed will have to confess that they were told the truth. They have no excuse. They are doubly guilty. God will be confirmed and glorified in his judgment.

When God commissioned Moses to go preach to Pharaoh, he knew Pharaoh would not believe. But God was glorified just as well. How patient was God with Pharaoh. After each of the ten plagues, the mighty monarch had an opportunity to repent. Despite Pharaoh's unbelief, the name of the LORD was magnified by the preaching of Moses. As the LORD declares to Pharaoh:

I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be preached in all the earth (Exodus 9:16; cf. Exodus 7:5; 9:14).

So preaching is a vital part of God's work in the redemption of people from all parts of the world. People must hear to be saved, and preaching is about the best way possible for people to hear God's Word with the full force of its truth.

In view of the earth-changing significance of preaching, this little book has the goal of making preaching practical. Instead of thinking in terms of grandiose displays of oratory, the approach in this book will be to consider the following essential topics related to preaching:

1. The Nature of a Sermon
2. The Person of the Preacher
3. The Form of the Sermon
4. The Parts of a Sermon
5. Procedure for Composing a Sermon
6. Preparing to Deliver a Sermon that has been Composed
7. Considerations During the Delivery of a Sermon

# 1. The Nature of a Sermon

So what is a person doing when he preaches? What is a sermon? J. Gresham Machen used to say 90% of definition is by negation. You say what something is not so people can better understand what it is. You can best understand and appreciate the saving power of the gospel only as you know all the things that will not save, such as your baptism, your prayers, your church-going, your good deeds, your offerings to the poor. So consider a few things a sermon is not.

## **A. What a sermon is *not***

A sermon is not a speech. People make different kinds of speeches. A sermon is not any of these different kinds of speeches.

### **1. A sermon is not a political speech**

A political speech seeks the personal favor and support of the hearers. A politician generally tells people what they want to hear.

A candidate for the presidency of an African country wanted to win votes. The previous president had kept people from cutting down trees in an effort to stop the erosion of the irreplaceable

topsoil of the land. But the people wanted to cut down more trees for their firewood and farming. So this new candidate for president told the people, “If you elect me as your president, you can cut down all the trees you want.” He was making a political speech. He told people what they wanted to hear. He won the election.

But Paul the Apostle said: “If I am still trying to please men, I am not a servant of Christ” (Galatians 1:10). A sermon must not be confused with a political speech. Preaching must not have as its goal pleasing people.

## **2. A sermon is not a military speech**

A sermon does not command unquestioning obedience. Sometimes a military commander sends men on a mission he knows they will not survive in order to accomplish a larger goal necessary for winning the war. Many soldiers died on the beaches of Normandy in France during World War II. The commanders knew hundreds would die before they sent them into the battle. Soldiers must obey their commanders without question even if it means losing their life. An old poet caught the spirit of the military command when he described the charge of a troop that guaranteed the death of every obedient soldier:

Theirs not to make reply,  
 Theirs not to reason why,  
 Theirs but to do and die:  
 Into the valley of Death  
 Rode the six hundred.

*(The Charge of the Light Brigade by Alfred Lord Tennyson)*

But the prophet Isaiah said, “Come now and let us reason together, says the LORD” (Isaiah 1:18). A sermon does not make the preacher into a military commander, though some preachers act like it does. He expects people to do exactly what he tells them to do without giving them any sound biblical reasons for what he declares.

Yes, a sermon makes clear demands of its hearers. The disciple of Christ must always be prepared to die to himself that he may live to Christ. But a sermon does not command that people obey without adequate representation of God’s truth in support of its commands.

**3. A sermon is not a story**

A story may be fictional or factual. But in either case, the purpose of story-telling is generally to entertain and inspire the imagination. Its purpose is not to promote the God of truth and the truth of God. Indeed, a sermon may contain a story, for the Bible is full of stories. But the story-teller has his focus primarily on the story. Indeed, the story may have a moral or a message. But a story is not equal to a sermon. Many people preach as though telling a good story is the same as preaching a good sermon. But telling a story is not preaching a sermon.

**4. A sermon is not an athletic coach’s speech**

The point of a sermon is not to give people a high emotional charge. A sermon is not the speech of a cheerleader who ratchets up the emotional level of a crowd to its highest peak so that they shout louder and ever louder, “rah, Rah, RAH!” “Go Team Go!” The purpose of a sermon is not to work the hearers into an uncontrolled frenzy. Emotional responses of joy or sorrow with smiles or tears may inevitably flow from a sermon. But the

intensity of feelings generated in the hearers cannot rightly measure the effectiveness of a sermon.

**5. A sermon is not the admonition of a father, a mother, or a family member**

It is not a call for loyalty to family traditions. “Don’t break ranks” is often the word passed down through the clan. A sermon is not a “good ole boy” message, telling people to “stay in line with the traditions that have been working in our family and our tribe for generations.”

**6. A sermon is not the charge of a village chief**

Someone stole the bicycle belonging to a missionary planting churches in Mozambique. The chief called all the villagers together. “Someone has stolen the pastor’s bicycle, and one of you knows who it is.” No one said a word. But a few days later a man reported to the chief that he had been digging in his garden and found parts of a bicycle buried in the dirt. After further digging, they found all the parts of the missing bicycle in that man’s garden. When the man finally confessed he had stolen the bicycle, he was banished from the village for life. This speech of the chief was very effective. It worked on the man’s conscience. But it was not a sermon.

So a sermon is not a speech. It is not the speech of a politician, intending to please people. It is not the speech of a military commander, demanding unquestioning obedience. It is not the speech of a story-teller who captures the imagination of his hearers. It is not the speech of a football coach or a cheerleader who arouses unbridled emotions. It is not the speech of a family member calling for loyalty to the clan. It is not the speech of a village chief piercing the heart and conscience.

So what is a sermon? If it is not any of these things, what is it? What is preaching? How is it different from all these other kinds of speeches?

## **B. What a sermon is**

A sermon may be defined as: **the official, ministerial, public proclamation, explanation, illustration and application of the Word of God written as it reveals Christ to the church and to the world.** Each aspect of this definition deserves further elaboration.

### **Three defining elements of a sermon**

#### **1. A sermon is official**

A sermon is not a collection of casual comments. A sermon has all the earmarks of a formal declaration. *Kerusso*, the term for “preaching” in the New Testament, depicts the announcement of a herald commissioned by the king. The preacher’s voice is like a trumpet-blast anticipating the proclamation of an official decree issued by the king, or preceding the coming of the king himself.

A sermon may be compared to the ultimatum brought by an ambassador to a foreign nation. At a critical moment in the relationship of two nations, an ambassador might declare, “Either you withdraw your troops from our soil, or we shall declare war!” This one man’s voice speaks for all the forces of an entire nation. An ambassador speaks as the official voice of his government.

“We are Christ’s ambassadors,” says the Apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 5:20). As ambassadors sent by Christ, preachers represent the power of the kingdom of God the Creator and Christ the Redeemer. As ambassadors of this eternal kingdom,

preachers declare God's will with the full authority of the resurrected Christ. Just before his ascension to the right hand of the Father, Jesus said, "All authority is given to me in heaven and earth. Therefore Go!" (Matthew 28:18).

This unique activity of heralding the will of the one, true, living God is grounded in the formal revelation of his will. Preaching is founded on the basis of the revelation of the divine message in Scripture. As such, this declaration must be pronounced with the full authority of an official sent by the King of kings.

## **2. A sermon is ministerial**

A sermon should normally be delivered by an ordained minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the order established by the Word of God, preaching is not done by just anyone. God's Word is proclaimed properly only by someone who has been called, ordained, and commissioned to the office of minister of the gospel. The prophets of the Old Testament were called and commissioned. Paul ordained elders in every town. Titus and Timothy were ordained to their office. When he wrote to Timothy Paul said,

Devote yourself ... to preaching. Do not neglect your gift which was given you ... when the body of elders laid their hands on you (1 Timothy 4:13-14).

This word from God says two things about preaching. It says that preaching requires a special gift from God, and requires the "laying on of the hands" of a body of elders. A person cannot simply decide by himself, "I don't like digging in the garden, and I can't be a doctor or a lawyer. So I think I'll be a preacher." No! A preacher must be gifted and called by God, since preaching is



a super-human task. In addition, the elders as recognized leaders of the church must place their stamp of approval on a person before he can properly preach. They must “lay their hands” on him, setting him apart and empowering him for this special task just as Moses laid his hands on Joshua, and the elders laid their hands on Timothy (cf. Deuteronomy 34:9; 1 Timothy 4:14). For that reason, the preaching of a sermon should be highly respected as an official, ministerial action.

### **3. A sermon is public**

A sermon is not normally preached in private. The message of Jesus Christ should be proclaimed openly so all can hear. Christianity is not a “mystery religion.” It does not consist of certain “secret truths” that must be whispered to keep other people from hearing. Christianity delights in declaring its truth openly. One of the main goals of Christianity is for the whole world to know the whole message about Jesus Christ and his power to save.

You are not preaching when you say, “Come over to my house tonight for a little private group meeting. Then I will tell you the hidden truths about Christ.” No! That is not Christianity. The Christian preacher boldly announces to the whole world the saving truths about Jesus the Christ.

So a sermon is *official, ministerial, and public*. It is not merely someone’s private ideas about God. It is not chanting mystic words taught by a priest, a magician or a witch doctor. It is the formal proclamation to the world of the saving truth sent from God.

Now note four additional aspects of preaching. Memorize these four words and review them regularly as you prepare your

sermon. A sermon is the official, ministerial, public **proclamation, explanation, illustration** and **application** of the Word of God written.

---

**NOTE: Say these words out loud.**

**If you are in a class, repeat these words in unison:**

**—proclamation**

**—explanation**

**—illustration**

**—application**

**Repeat them. AGAIN. And AGAIN!**

**Now consider more carefully these four aspects of preaching:**

---

## **Four additional aspects of preaching**

### **1. Preaching is proclamation**

Inherent authority must characterize the delivery of a sermon. You are not simply sharing your latest ideas and then asking the congregation, What do you think? You are a herald sent by God to deliver God's message to the people. You insult the solemn character of the sermon when you merely offer your personal opinion.

Indeed, you must not be authoritarian. You must speak with a sensitivity appropriate to the Scriptures. But even a message of love and compassion can be proclaimed powerfully as a message from God rather than an expression of the sentimental attitudes of men.

“A lamb in the closet, a lion in the pulpit” is a phrase that captures something of the proper perspective on preaching as “proclamation.” William Murray, one of the early missionaries to Malawi, was visiting with a young missionary about to preach his first sermon in Chichewa, the language of the people. Sensing the young preacher’s nervousness, Murray rose to his full height and declared, “When I am in the pulpit I am a king on his throne, and I fear no man!” Murray was communicating the sense of authority that must be present in every proclamation of the gospel.

***2. A vital part of preaching is explanation***

Inherent in a sermon is the ministry of teaching, of explaining the truth of God so that it can be easily understood. Jesus taught the people “as they were able to understand” (Mark 4:33). He taught them many things in parables, in stories, because he wanted them to understand.

Remember the role of the priests as Ezra read the law to the assembled people?

“Ezra opened the book ... The Levites ... instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read” (Nehemiah 8:5, 7, 9).

The preacher must always be teaching even as he is preaching. He should never denounce some particular act as sinful until he has made clear the reason that particular action is sinful. One church split in two when the preacher declared dancing to be sinful without explaining why. A great tragedy occurred when

a missionary declared female circumcision to be sinful before explaining why the tradition was wrong. Another crisis arose when a preacher denounced polygamy as evil without providing a solution to the problems created for wives and children that were set aside.

Do your best to anticipate problems people might have in understanding the passage of Scripture that is the basis of your message. Are you recalling God's command for Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice? Then anticipate the larger question: Did God actually give this command, or did Abraham only dream it up? Did Paul really mean that no thief could enter the kingdom of God? Anticipating questions that might arise in people's minds is a vital aspect of teaching the treasures of God's truth.

### **3. *Preaching must include illustration***

C. H. Spurgeon says illustrations are like windows in a building. They let in the light. An architect designed a chapel in the middle of a building with classrooms completely encircling the room. The architect's design included high windows around the ceiling of the chapel, to let in lighting from the sun. But all sunlight was excluded when the ceiling was lowered and the windows eliminated to save costs. So the chapel depended altogether on artificial light, which could never equal the illumination that only God's sunlight could give. The chapel became rather depressing for the loss of sunlight.

So a sermon needs windows of illustration to let in the light. Truth must be illuminated. A sermon can be overloaded with pure doctrine and tight exegesis. A well-placed illustration can lighten the intensity of the message.

But where do you get illustrations? What are the main sources of illustrations that can clarify the specific points of a sermon?

---

***Before reading further, answer this question for yourself.***

***Answer it as a class:***

***Where are the best places to find good illustrations for sermons?***

---

The first source of good illustrations is, of course, the Bible itself. Nothing can drive home the truth of Scripture better than an illustration from the Bible. Are you trying to make a point about the evil of covetousness? Then tell the story of Ahab's greedy desire for Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21:1–25). Do you wish to strengthen the solemn call for decisions to follow Christ? Then dramatize Joshua's challenge to the people: "Choose you this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15).

To make the best use of the Bible, you must know your Bible. So read your Bible. Read the whole Bible. Read a single book of the Bible 25 times over. Then move on to another. Never stop reading the Bible. When you get familiar with the gospel of John, read the prophecy of Isaiah. Then the letter to the Romans. Then the law-book of Deuteronomy. Then the record of the ongoing work of the resurrected Christ in the book of Acts. Familiarize yourself with the treasure-house of illustrations in the Bible.

History serves as another good source of illustrations. Jesus referred to the incident of the tower falling on certain people and not on others to illustrate the universal need for all people to repent (Luke 13:1–5). Were the people who suffered this public calamity more sinful? No! But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Rehearse the dramatic saving of the British

troops at Dunkirk. Recall the strong faith of the first Ugandan Martyrs. Study the fascinating events of human history as a source of illustrations.

Science can be another source of illustrations. Metamorphosis changes an ugly caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly. Compare this transformation to being “born again,” or to the radical change of the Christian’s body at the resurrection. Consider the amazing process of photosynthesis in which green leaves transform bad air into good air whenever sunlight strikes the leaf. Compare this transformation to the way in which Christians change the entire atmosphere of their culture.

Current events as reported in a newspaper, a magazine, radio, television, or the internet can be a constant source of illustrations. An airplane crashes because an inexperienced pilot approached the runway too slowly and the tail of the plane snapped as it dragged across the tarmac. So be warned of rushing into responsibilities such as eldership in the church before adequate experience and maturity have prepared you.

Literature can be an excellent source of illustrations, including children’s stories and devotional literature. The *Jungle Doctor’s Story Book* is fun to read and fruitful for illustrations. A monkey who crosses the equator doesn’t find everything different right away even though he has crossed into another hemisphere. But as he travels further, he discovers he has entered an entirely different world. So the person first converted to Christ may not find everything different right away. But gradually he will discover a whole new world.

Proverbial sayings can be a good source of illustrations. “Where the elders are, the grass is green,” says an old African proverb promoting respect for age. But be careful. A proverbial saying must be “spot-on” or it will distract people’s minds. Sometimes traditional wisdom can contradict biblical truth. “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy” was a popular saying in Jesus’ day that had to be corrected (Matthew 5:43).

To derive the greatest benefit from these various sources of illustration, keep on reading. Don’t stop reading when you finally have a university degree. As the old saying from Sir Francis Bacon goes, “Reading makes a full man,” and the preacher must be full before he preaches.

Many sources are readily at hand for illustrating different points in a sermon. Never resent the time it takes to think up an illustration. Even a bad illustration is better than no illustration—as long as it’s not too bad! You can find books of sermon illustrations, though people will generally recognize a “canned” illustration that has been taken from a printed collection of sermon illustrations.

So how do you develop your own illustrations? Begin early in the week by fixing your mind on the main points of your sermon. Then keep your “illustration antennas” alert so you can spot an article in the newspaper, an event at a football game, or a verse from your daily Bible reading. As you begin composing your sermon, isolate one particular point you are trying to make. Get your thinking clear on that one point. Then an appropriate illustration will come much easier. For instance, you may want to illustrate persistence in prayer. Jesus’ words actually could be

understood to mean, “Keep on asking ... keep on seeking ... keep on knocking” (Matthew 7:7). Jesus encourages persistence in prayer. So focus your mind on the idea of “persistence.” Now what comes to mind to illustrate persistence?

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***Stop! Think up your own illustration of  
“persistence” before reading further.***

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Now consider these few suggestions that might illustrate persistence: (1) a woodpecker rapping on a tree trunk; (2) a carpenter driving a nail; (3) Winston Churchill’s famous speech: “Never give up! Never! NEVER!” (4) a young man proposing marriage. Now test the various illustrations of persistence as they might relate to Jesus’ teaching, and decide which would best encourage persistence in prayer.

A few words of caution about illustrations. Don’t turn your sermon into pure fluff with too many illustrations. A good illustration for each major point is generally enough. Don’t make your illustrations too good. Be prepared to say “No” to an illustration if you sense it will distract people’s minds from the main point you are making. Otherwise they will remember your “great” illustration and nothing else you said.

So a sermon includes:

forceful **proclamation**,

clarifying **explanation** and

vivifying **illustration**.



**4. Application is an absolute “must” for every effective sermon**

Don't neglect making specific application of your sermon to your hearers. In the old puritan tradition, an hour of application would follow an hour of exposition. Usually the applicatory aspect of the sermon gets too little time and attention, especially in the case of a young preacher. But a balance must be achieved between explanation of the word from God and application to the lives of God's people.

The central, most developed application in your sermon ought to grow out of the central message of the text. If your main point is trusting God, then develop various concrete situations in which a person must trust God:

- If you have a guilty conscience, trust God that the blood of the innocent Lamb of God cleanses you from all sin.
- If you cannot find a job, trust God to open a door that no one can close.
- If you are being hated and mistreated for your Christian testimony, trust God that your reward in heaven is great.

So first think about specific ways you can apply the main point of your sermon. Then develop other applications from your secondary points.

Developing good applications takes much thought and much prayer! For some people developing illustrations is easier than for others. But in every case, effective application requires serious and prayerful thinking. Consider the various groups of people in your congregation. Some may be non-Christians. How does your main point apply to them in a way that is different than

to the Christian? You will be preaching to men and women, church officers and children, bosses and workers, very young and very old, rich and poor. Think very carefully about how your particular message from God's Word applies to each of these different categories of people.

Note this principle well. People will be only as concrete in their personal application of a sermon as the preacher is concrete in his application of the sermon. If you are specific, they will be specific. If you are content with broad generalities, they will remain general in their personal application, and your sermon will barely impact their lives. Many times an alert hearer will make applications to himself that you did not even mention, if you are specific in your application. As people are leaving church after the sermon someone may say, "You said . . .," but you didn't say that at all. By the working of the Spirit with the Word, your hearers were making application to themselves. But if you remain in the theoretical realm of broad generalities in your sermons, they will remain untouched in the specifics of their lives. So *make applications*. Make many of them. Make them for all the different people of your congregation.

As awkward as it may seem, "you"-preaching is essential for effective application. It is the biblical way. Check it out for yourself.

How did John the Baptist address those who came for his baptism?

You brood of vipers! Who warned YOU to flee from the coming wrath? [YOU] produce fruit in keeping with repentance (Luke 3:7-8).

How did Jesus make application in his Sermon on the Mount?

YOU are the salt of the earth ... YOU are the light of the world ... Let YOUR light shine before men, that they may see YOUR good deeds (Matthew 5:13–16).

How did Peter apply his sermon at Pentecost?

[YOU] repent and [YOU] be baptized ... [YOU] save yourselves from this corrupt generation (Acts 2:38, 40).

How did Paul apply his message to the recipients of his letters?

I urge YOU ... to offer YOUR bodies as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1).

Don't YOU know that YOU YOURSELVES are God's temple, and that God's Spirit lives in YOU (1 Corinthians 3:16).

I urge YOU to live a life worthy of the calling YOU have received (Ephesians 4:1).

You may be an effective preacher. But your preaching will be much more effective if “you” would do “you”-preaching.

Of course, at times the application must be framed more tenderly. As the writer to the Hebrews says, “LET US approach the throne of grace with confidence ... LET US leave the elementary teachings about Christ” (Hebrews 4:16; 6:1). As a young preacher, you will want to be gentle even in your “you”-preaching. But

generally the preacher must take himself completely out of the picture so that God may speak directly to the people through him. Indeed, you must be sure to “practice what you preach.” It is a good exercise for the preacher to repent of his own failures before he preaches. In any case, the great bulk of application in the Bible is made directly with a “YOU” addressed specifically to the recipients of God’s Word.

So a sermon should embody these four characteristics: **proclamation, explanation, illustration, application.**

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**NOTE: AS A CLASS OR AS AN INDIVIDUAL,**

**REPEAT THESE FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF A SERMON OUT LOUD.**

**DO IT SEVERAL TIMES OVER UNTIL**

**THEY ARE FIRMLY ROOTED IN YOUR THOUGHT-PROCESSES.**

**THEN TEST YOUR NEXT SERMON ON THE BASIS OF THESE FOUR CHARACTERISTICS.**

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### **Preaching based on the Word of God written**

But what is it that should be proclaimed, explained, illustrated and applied? What should be the subject matter of every sermon? Our “working definition” of a sermon reads as follows:

A sermon is the official, ministerial, public proclamation, explanation, illustration and application of the *Word of God written ...*

The Word of God written should be the subject matter of every sermon. Not the word of man, not your personal opinion, not the latest hot ideas, but *God’s word*. Isn’t that what Paul declared as the subject of all his teaching and preaching? As he solemnly charged young preacher Timothy in the presence of God and of

Jesus Christ who shall judge the living and the dead, “Preach the Word! Be at it when it is in season and out of season” (2 Timothy 4:1–2). When Paul summarized his ministry across several years to the Ephesian elders, he indicated that he had not hesitated to preach to them “the whole will of God” (Acts 20:27). So where did Paul learn about this will of God? In writing to the Corinthians, he described the basis of his unity in ministry with Apollos by this memorable saying: “Do not go beyond what is written” (1 Corinthians 4:6). The written Word of God is the all-sufficient subject matter for all your sermons for the rest of your life.

The subject of the proper sermon must always be “the Word of God written.” Nothing more and nothing less. The whole counsel of God, from Genesis through Revelation. Leave nothing out and add nothing in.

The biblical preacher must strive for a balance. He will seek to cover the entirety of the written Word of God. Only then can he say he has fulfilled the Apostle’s admonition to “Preach the Word.” Not “a” Word but “the” Word, the Written Word of God in all its fullness.

*Question:* Should you use a dream as the text for a sermon? Can you say, “Thus says the LORD” about a dream or a vision you have had and proclaim it with all the authority that belongs to the revealed Word of God? Does a dream have equal authority over the people of God as the Bible? Should a preacher say, “I have a word from the Lord,” and then preach his “dream” with the same authority as he would preach the Scriptures?

No, he should not. Even if a person believes that God still speaks in dreams and visions, these personal experiences cannot—they must not—be placed on the same level as the Bible. By its very nature, a dream is vague and unclear. No matter how vivid it might be, a dream and a vision have shadowy elements that make for uncertainty in understanding. The Scriptures stand boldly before us, available for all to see. No word of biblical prophecy as recorded in Scripture ever came by private interpretation. Instead, holy men of God spoke as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit so that not one particle of erroneous thought could ever come in (2 Peter 1:20–21). Whatever “dreams” or “visions” a person may have today, they cannot equal the perfection and authority of the written Word of God in Scripture. So, preach the Word, not your dream.

On one occasion, a pastor had a vision. In his dream he saw their church growing to over a thousand members. This church was located in a country where people were not responsive to the evangelical gospel. The church had grown very slowly over many years. But now the pastor’s dream said they would grow to over a thousand members. It was an exciting message to the congregation. But the pastor reported one condition that must be fulfilled if his dream, his unbelievable dream of growth would occur. For the dream to come true, the pastor explained that he alone must have full authority over all the activities and all the resources of the church. No one must question his authority.

This pastor’s dream destroyed the church. All the hard work over many years came to nothing. For he was not preaching the “Word of God written.” He was preaching his “dream.”

It's much easier to preach a personal dream, vision, or idea than it is to preach the "Word of God Written" in Holy Scripture. It takes work—hard work—to understand and to preach the whole Bible. That's why Paul tells young preacher Timothy, "Study to show yourself approved before God, a workman who does not need to be ashamed, who correctly handles the Word of Truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). A dream requires no work. While you are totally relaxed, sleeping in your snuggly bed, you dream. But to be approved by God as a preacher, you must work. Everyone in the church should recognize that you are a "workman," a "working man." They should be able to clearly see that you get up early in the morning, you stay up late at night, you work diligently in the Word.

One experienced preacher honestly shared his struggle with working hard to prepare his sermons. He said, "Many times on Sunday morning I prayed, 'LORD, I promise I'll do better next week if you'll just get me through my sermon today.'" Indeed, you will never be as prepared to preach as you ought to be. But make your commitment to be a workman who does not need to be ashamed, correctly handling the Word of Truth.

A standard dictionary for biblical Greek uses several terms to describe how the preacher should work as he studies God's Word according to 2 Timothy 2:15. He must be:

- especially conscientious in discharging his obligation;
- zealous and eager;
- taking pains;
- making every effort;

- being conscientious (Danker’s Greek-English Lexicon on *spoudazō* [σπουδάζω])

Is that the way you approach the Bible as you prepare to preach? Anything less than the kind of work described in these phrases does not measure up to the standard set for preachers of God’s Word.

Nothing can be more exciting and more satisfying to a preacher than to “preach the Word.” It resonates with the soul. If you have worked and prayed, you know you have done a proper job whatever people may say. As the saying goes, “The Master praises; what are men?” As Paul points out even as he admonishes Timothy to preach the Word, it is “in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead” that you preach.

### **Preaching as it reveals Christ**

The Word of God written reveals Christ. From Genesis to Revelation the Bible reveals Christ. How could it do otherwise! The word “Christ” means “Messiah,” “Anointed One.” From the Old Testament perspective, he is the “Promised One,” the “One Who Comes.” He is the seed of the woman who shall crush the head of the serpent and so deliver his people from the curse brought about by their sin (Genesis 3:15; Romans 16:20). He is the “Noah” whose name means “Rest,” embodying the hope of Noah’s father that he would be the One to deliver from the curse spoken over the ground (Genesis 5:29; 2 Peter 3:20–21). He is the promised “seed” of Abraham by whom all the nations of the world would be blessed (Genesis 22:17–18; Galatians 3:16). He is the Passover Lamb whose blood on the doorpost delivered his people from the death-angel at the time of the exodus (Exodus



12:23; 1 Corinthians 5:7–8). He is great David’s greater Son, who as God’s Holy One could not see corruption (2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:26–32; Hebrews 1:4–5). Indeed, seeing Christ in all the Scriptures does not provide a license to impose Jesus in every text of the Bible without considering the meaning of the words of Scripture in their original context. But since all truth is one, and since all things are summed up in Him who is the head of all creation (Colossians 1:15–19), all Scripture ultimately leads to Jesus the Christ and his messianic kingdom. This principle the resurrected Christ confirmed about himself when “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27; cf. Acts 28:23). Never again, since the moment of Christ’s entering into human flesh, may a text of the Old Testament be properly read apart from its fulfillment in Jesus as the Christ. For his coming brought to full fruition the whole of redemptive truth. Otherwise, distortion of the original intent of the text is inevitable. Since all biblical truth can be understood only from the perspective of Christ’s redemptive work, every text of Scripture ultimately finds its resting-place in Him.

### **Preaching to the church and to the world**

One element of preaching remains to be considered. To whom should you preach? St. Francis of Assisi preached to the birds. Billy Graham preached to the stumps in a Florida swamp. To whom should you preach?—*You must preach to the church and to the world.*

First, Preach to the church. The church exists as the natural recipient of preaching. Members of Christ’s church already have heard the call of God’s Word. They have assembled themselves

for worship. They present themselves before you, expecting to receive nourishment from the Word of God. Vital to their worship is hearing God speak to them. They hear his Word when the Scriptures are read. But in addition they must hear God's word through a sermon preached by a person properly called of God as his messenger to them. A sermon from Scripture is essential to every proper worship service. Apart from the proclamation of the Word of God, a worship service cannot be complete.

How sad to see congregation after congregation coming together hungering for a word from the LORD, but hearing nothing from God's Word. "The hungry sheep look up and are not fed," as English poet John Milton vividly describes the sad situation that prevails even today. In preaching to the assembled congregation of Israel, Moses exclaims, "What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?" (Deuteronomy 4:8). But how sad that those who by right of adoption into the family of God possess the Scriptures as their heritage do not hear it proclaimed when they assemble for worship at church.

*Preach the Word to the church.* Preach the whole Word, from Genesis to Revelation. People today who are called of God continue to have the responsibility to "Preach the Word" whether it is "in season" or "out of season;" whether it is favorably received or firmly rejected (2 Timothy 4:2). This "Word" to be preached is nothing more and nothing less than the inspired message from God found in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Whenever God's people assemble for worship, God's Word from the Holy Scriptures must be proclaimed to them by a person properly called and ordained as a preacher of the Word.

As the Apostle Peter says, “If anyone speaks, he should do it as one declaring the very word of God” (1 Peter 4:11). Of course, Peter is not saying every time a Christian opens his mouth he must declare a divine utterance that comes directly from the LORD. He is speaking instead of the person who preaches to God’s people. They assemble to hear the Word of the LORD, and the preacher has the obligation to declare to them God’s Word. The preacher should be “prophetic” even though he is not a “prophet” by preaching according to the message of God’s prophets. He can be “apostolic” though he is not an “apostle” by preaching in accord with the teaching of the apostles. The apostles and prophets have laid the foundation of the church, which needed to be done only once. For a building can have only one foundation. But the preacher whose sermons are true to the recorded words as found in Scripture can “build” on the “foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Ephesians 2:20–22; 4:11–13). “No other foundation can anyone lay, other than the one that has been laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11). It is not the preacher’s calling to lay again the foundation already laid by Jesus Christ through his apostles and prophets. Instead, he must carefully build on that foundation of gospel truth. He must build with the treasures of God’s Word—gold, silver and precious stone instead of wood, hay and stubble (1 Corinthians 3:12–15).

So when the church assembles for worship, it is time for the opening of God’s written Word. This Word of Scripture must be carefully studied, maturely considered, digested by the preacher, and related to the specific situation of the congregation.

So preach God's written Word to the church. "Declare to my people their rebellion," says the prophet (Isaiah 58:1). Paul addresses his letters to the churches. The seven letters in the book of Revelation address the churches. So follow the biblical example. Preach to the church.

*Secondly, Preach to the World.* Preaching must also be directed to the world. The Old Testament repeatedly urges the proclamation of the truth to all the nations. "Declare His glory to the nations" is the cry of David as he brings up the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 16:24). The psalmist echoes the identical words: "Declare His glory to the nations" (Psalm 96:3).

Every preacher is called and commissioned by his LORD the Christ to go with the gospel to all the nations. As Jesus said, "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole inhabited earth as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14). The gospel of Christ's kingdom must be preached to the whole world. But where in the world is the world?

First of all, the "world" may be found within the church. The world is not far away. False members are regularly in the church. Unbelieving visitors may be brought into the church by friends or relatives. Seeking souls may wander into the church. You can expect them to be in your worship services regularly.

*Question:* Should a pastor preach evangelistically in the church? Should he preach for conversions? Should he preach with the expectation that some people will be "born again" even as he preaches to the assembled believers? What do you think?

Yes! Of course! Not every Sunday, but regularly the saving gospel of Christ should be preached evangelistically in church. Paul charges Pastor Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Timothy 4:5). You don’t know when the Holy Spirit may open the hearts of a person who has been in church all his life, but never has been saved. The minister should preach the gospel regularly in church, with a keen expectation that some will be saved. He may alert his congregation that he will preach evangelistically for the salvation of souls on the first Sunday of every month for the next six months. Then the congregation will be encouraged to invite and re-invite and re-re-invite lost sinners to come to church on those special Sundays.

So the “world” is in the church. Preach the saving gospel of Christ to the world in the church.

Secondly, the “world” is obviously outside the church. The world is in the market-place. The world is in the town center. The world is in the public meeting-places. The world is in the hospitals, the schools, the shops, the offices, the prisons, and on the sports fields. Wherever the lost world of unbelievers may be found, there the gospel must be preached.

Steven Lungu was a radical. He and his team of terrorists were on the way to bomb a bank. As they headed toward the bank, they passed an evangelistic service meeting in a tent. Steven concluded that bombing this tent might be just as good as bombing the bank. So he told his men to wait outside while he went in to “case the joint.” He sat on the back row. A woman was singing. The message of the song captured him. He stayed seated, entranced. The evangelist began to preach. His men outside the tent were

wondering what had happened to him. They were all prepared to blow up the tent. When the preacher gave the invitation to come forward and receive Christ, Steven Lungu was the first to head down the aisle. In front of the whole congregation he pulled out his guns and explosives and laid them down before the preacher. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, he was saved. As a consequence, every person in that tent was “saved.” At the least they were saved from being blown up by the bomb of a terrorist.

The evangelist was preaching the gospel “to the world.” So people in the world were saved.

Often a preacher gets so involved in ministry to his own congregation that he neglects his responsibility to preach to the nations. One old missionary story tells about Raymond Lull, a man who during the Middle Ages decided to follow a different way of “conquering” the Muslims. Instead of joining the Crusades, he would preach to them. But in order to communicate effectively, he had to learn their language. Arabic is not an easy language to learn. So he invested many years in mastering both the Arabic language and the Muslim Koran. Then he sailed to North Africa. He went to the heart of a city and began to dispute with the Muslim scholars of their community. They could not refute his arguments. He was beginning to win converts. So they prepared to stone him for defaming the name of Mohammed. But the chief scholar among them would not allow it. By mastering the Koran so thoroughly, this man had shown himself too noble to be stoned. So they put him on a ship and banished him from their country. But Raymond Lull could not stay away. After several years of further study and prayer, he returned. He went directly to the center of a marketplace and began to preach Jesus Christ

once more. So this time they took him out and stoned him to death. He took seriously the command of Christ. He preached to the world.

Paul regularly began his preaching in a new city at their synagogue, which was the “church” of the old covenant people of God. But in Lystra of Asia and in Athens of Europe, he preached to the world in the open forum (Acts 14:8–20; 17:16–34). Preachers today often get too comfortable preaching in their churches. You must also find a way to preach to the world.

If you are pastor to a local church, never forget the responsibility you have to preach to the world as well as to the church. Even if only a few people stop to listen, preach in the public square. In some countries the door of public preaching has been closed. But wherever it can be done, preach openly to the world. Make full use of the opportunity so long as you have it. One of the great open doors of many African countries today is the privilege of preaching almost anywhere. In the marketplace, in the prison, in the hospital, in the schools, on the streets, **PREACH!**

On one occasion a group of students with their teacher went regularly to a marketplace for preaching every week. Their strategy was to go to the same place at the same time week after week. Just across the pathway from their preaching point was a butcher’s shop with raw meat hanging from a rafter. Week after week the butcher kept chopping his meat throughout every preaching service. But just before the long school break, the butcher came out from his shop and approached the preacher. “I’ve been saved,” he said. “I’ve stopped spending all my profit

on beer. Now I take the money home to my wife. Where can I find a church so I can be baptized?”

All these weeks he had been listening to the outdoor preaching. God had spoken to him through the preaching, and he had been saved. His life would never be the same. If he was the only convert as a result of that weekly effort, it was worth it.

So preach to the church. But also preach to the world. In this modern age of technology, you have a special opportunity. Use the radio. Use the television. Use the internet. Preach to the world.

So to whom is the gospel to be preached? Who are to be the recipients of the preached word? The church and the world.

### **Conclusion on the Nature of a Sermon**

So a sermon may be defined as: “*the official, ministerial, public proclamation, explanation, illustration and application of the Word of God written as it reveals Christ to the church and to the world.*” Memorize this definition of preaching. Not that it is the only or even the best definition. But at least it provides a basis for meditation on the essential elements of preaching. Then by God’s grace you might become an even more effective preacher.