

# Preaching: A Suggested Checklist<sup>1</sup>

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## I. THE SERMON INTRODUCTION

A. *Have you started, not with the biblical text, but rather with some contemporary notion that is interesting and relevant?*

This is especially important with a congregation that includes newcomers to the faith.

B. *Is there only one, crystal clear notion in your introduction?*

Prof. David Buttrick's research indicates that including more than one idea in your introduction—even introducing yourself to a guest audience as well as introducing the sermon—can lead to confusion. This is not to say don't introduce yourself if you are unknown but keep it super short.)

C. *Have you remembered within the first two minutes to “front-end load” relevancy, even if only by intimation, so the congregation has a tangible motive to stay with you throughout the sermon?*

Unlike you, most people aren't interested in a Bible passage for its own sake. For example:  
we want to look at John 4 in some detail this morning and as we do we will find two important ways to . . . , so join me as we explore Jesus' interaction with the woman of Samaria. I'm excited by what we will soon see.

D. *Have you remembered to end the introduction with a clear, crisp sentence that effectively signals the conclusion to your introduction?*

Suggestion: make the last word the introductory notion itself, sound as though it's a concluding sentence, and then pause for a few seconds before moving into the rest of the sermon.) (N.B. Be similarly clear at the end of any point.)

For example: “So my friends we have identified a problem—greed” [Then pause for a few seconds before moving to the body of the sermon.]

## II. GENERAL

A. *Do you know exactly what you want to say in a short memorable sentence of less than ten words?*

There's an old saying, ‘Where there is mist in the pulpit there is dense fog in the pew.’ Nail down, in the most clear and exact terms, exactly what your message is.

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<sup>1</sup> I owe most of the content here to the work of Preaching Professors Haddon Robinson (*Biblical Preaching*) and David Buttrick (*Homiletic: Moves and Structures*), as well as to many years of team-teaching Basics of Biblical Preaching at Wycliffe with seasoned Anglican clerics.

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For example: “Recalling the presence of God dispels fear” (based on Ps 23:4), “With God’s help, *Choose the right Lifestyle, Choose the right Lord*” (Psalms 1 and 2 respectively).

Important suggestion: Break every preaching idea into two parts. First, formulate a statement that starts with one of the five Ws (who, what, where, when, why) or how—insist on this to avoid muddle! And second, formulate a responsory statement that “answers” the five W’s or how. (The first statement makes a great topic statement (or *sermon title*!), whereas the second statement summarizes the actual content or *message* of the sermon. This approach works *wonders* by bringing clarity to your thought processes and, in turn, the sermon.)

Example 1 (secular to illustrate this can be done with any concept<sup>3</sup>):

What happened to Humpty Dumpty? He fell off a wall and couldn’t be put back together again by the king’s men and horses.

Example 2 (Psalm 1): Why choose devotion to God’s teaching over the advice and direction of friends who don’t know God? Because only God’s way brings stability, productivity, and assurance of a lasting future.

Example 3 (John 3:16): How much God loved the world—and why it matters;<sup>4</sup> So much that He sent us His only beloved son—and because by believing in Jesus we can live forever!

*B. Do you know and understand—to the point of being burdened and/or excited about —why your concept is important to preach?*

For example, you should be able to think something like:

Like me, the congregation is going to find this biblical concept really helpful in their walk with Christ, so much so that as I look out over the congregation I can hardly wait to share this sermon with them, knowing the difference that, with God’s help, it will make.

*C. Have you thought through application and relevancy not primarily to you, but to different representative groups within the congregation (old, young, rich, poor, unemployed, physically challenged. etc.)?*

Help: You don’t have to cover every representative group, but some for sure. Besides, targetting one subgroup often has a ‘spill-over’ effect to other subgroups; they can usually bridge the gap between the related subgroup and theirs.<sup>5</sup>

*D. Have you restated your main point(s) so often that you worry it seems excessive?*

It probably won’t be, because the congregation is listening for the first time, is at times distracted, etc.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Including a large paragraph of Scripture or even a whole book. This too is a great exercise in clarity and, if done well, comprehensive understanding (if you strive to omit nothing essential).

<sup>4</sup> Note that two w/h statements are called for, each with its own “answer.” Clarity remains!

<sup>5</sup> I am often amazed to hear people say that an application for, say, young married couples, fit their situation as, say, someone with a roommate, or an older couple.

<sup>6</sup> I can’t resist an anecdote. A student whose sermon was being evaluated in a preaching class got very defensive when fellow students agreed with me that the main point (big idea) of the sermon was unclear. In anger and frustration she held up her *manuscript* as proof and said, “it’s highlighted right here in yellow!” The

E. *Do you have four or five short, or two or three longer, illustrations (stories, anecdotes, quotes, etc.) to support any given main point that you want people to remember, so that by the end, the congregation will not just know the point but realize (ideally, be affected by) its significance/importance?*

F. *Have you spoken using the active voice?*

Write the sermon in conversational style, avoiding the style of an academic essay. See further example G immediately below.

G. *Is your sermon replete with words that create images?*

For example, change a sentence that reads “it is evident that two natures can be found in ourselves, one earthly and the other heavenly,” into something like “frisk us and you’ll see that we carry two passports, one that says we are citizens of this world and another that says we are citizens of heaven.”<sup>7</sup>

Prof. David Buttrick says that if three sentences go by without a word picture (e.g. yellow stream of light; stuck-to-your-fingers candy floss; a blue-and-white police cruiser; a neon-lit street to nowhere laid out by the rich; etc.) you risk losing people’s attention. (This probably can be done that frequently. Yet the general principle of using image-filled language is important.)

H. *Have you thought about, and made clear, how your central notion actually works (and applies) in real life?*

For example, in preaching on “turning the other cheek,” how is this going to actually work in the case of, say, a child facing a school-yard bully, or an older single woman who realizes she has been cheated by paying too much money for a used car?

I. *Do you have concrete applications of your main idea?*

Recommendation: rather than making application by telling people what they ought to do, which doesn’t go over well in our culture, be more indirect and suggestive; e.g., “For some of us this might mean doing, x, for others it might giving up y,” etc.

J. *Have you reckoned with what Buttrick calls a “slowed-down group consciousness”?*

Speaking to a large group of varied people is like steering a big ship; you have to make turns slowly. In other words you can’t move quickly from one idea to the next in the same way you can by talking one-on-one to a close friend. Rather you need to transition slowly by doing such things as announcing it, using explicit verbal signals, repetition, etc. You can turn quickly and sharply in sportscar, but not from a large (especially unfamiliar) pulpit. In short, transition more slowly than you might think necessary, using all your signal turns.

### III. THE SERMON’S CONCLUSION

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penny dropped when she realized why we chuckled; emphasis in *the written manuscript* doesn’t necessarily transfer. In short, emphasis in a speech must be conveyed *orally* (by intonation, repetition, etc.)

Some people, including perhaps the speaker, don’t seem to need repetition as much as others and find it redundant and thus bothersome. It this includes you as the preacher, don’t forget that you are in a minority! In other words, do it anyway---for the benefit of *most* others.

<sup>7</sup> The example is from a sermon many years ago by The Rev. Barbara Brown-Taylor.

*A. Have you given thought to your conclusion?*

Your sermon should not end suddenly or without notice, rather, it should carefully thought through, most often involving one of the following: summation, review, giving a piece of supporting material that is the capstone to what you are saying, returning to an initial question or problem with an answer or thoughtful response.