



Bishopdale Theological College (Nelson)

The Institute of New Anglicanism

School of Preaching

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for novices ☺

The First Fifteen

capturing the joy of discovery at the heart of biblical preaching

From Text to Sermon

shaping clear, faithful and relevant sermons

Held by Conviction

demonstrating how theology is more important than methodology



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1. *The First Fifteen:*

capturing the joy of discovery at the heart of biblical preaching

The assumption: interpretation & application follows OBSERVATION
 (what does it mean?) (how does it affect my life?) (what is the text actually saying?)

The example: the Cook Strait Ferry

A practice text: Colossians 1.28-29

Step One: Read and reread the passage (and do so aloud!) in its context

Question: why is reading the text *aloud* so important?

make a note of your first responses to a range of questions

allow the senses a little space – read the passage ‘through’ each sense

consider taking your text to different places/people and read as life swirls around you

consider the spiritual practice of *lectio divina*

Time Out: John 2

Step Two: Decide on the unit of thought for the passage you wish to study

Step Three: Utilize a variety of translations - and note the key differences

the literal: NASB, NKJV, NRSV, ESV

the dynamic equivalent: GNB, TNIV, NLT

the paraphrase: Phillips, CEV, The Message

Step Four: Identify every person in the passage and jot down everything about them

Time Out: John 20

Step Five: Finish off Rudyard Kipling's questions so loved by journalists

"I have six faithful serving men who taught me all I know.

Their names are what and where and when; and who and how and why."

What?

Time Out: 1 Thessalonians 3

Where?

Time Out: Luke 15

When?

Time Out: Nehemiah 8

Step Six: Identify every verb in the passage and ask...

who is doing the action?

to whom is the action being done?

when was the action done: past, present, or future?

are there any commands, or 'imperatives', and give them special attention

Time Out: Psalm 126

Step Seven: List every word that repeats

Ideally, it is the repetition in the original languages that may prove significant and it is possible to discover what the original words are – and study them – without knowing Hebrew and Greek (but learning the languages is preferable!)

Time Out: Philippians 4

Step Eight: Meditate upon the 'little words that mean so much'

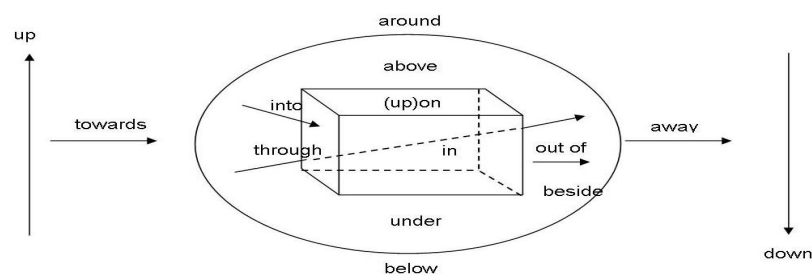
the connectives: these are the hinges on which the passage swings

for example: after, then, therefore, but, as, indeed, when otherwise, because, for, so that, if, where, however, finally...

<i>Connective</i>	<i>Function of Connective</i>	<i>Biblical examples (NIV)</i>
___ after	a. time/chronological	i. Rom 8:1
___ then	b. local/place	ii. Phil 1:9-10
___ therefore	c. reason	iii. Acts 2:14
___ but	d. result	iv. Matthew 8:1
___ as	e. purpose	v. John 8:31
___ indeed	f. contrast	vi. Heb 3: 12-14
___ otherwise	g. comparison	vii. Phil 3:1
___ for/because	h. series of facts	
___ so that	i. emphasis	
___ if	j. condition	
___ however		
___ finally		

Time Out: Psalm 67

the prepositions: these are the directions in which a passage moves



Other prepositions: before, behind, with, after, for, like etc.

Time Out: Colossians 1

Step Nine: Clarify what the 'ripe observation' for your sermon actually will be

I recognize it may just be me, but I have never reached this stage in the process without the Holy Spirit quickening something within me. I have always found there to be (at least) one observation that, enflamed by the Spirit, lodges in my heart and gradually enlarges into the structure of a sermon. I have had sermons germinate on from all of these 'steps'. And when that initial pivotal discovery is ours - the impact it has on our excitement and passion as we go to preach and teach is so significant.

“The Spirit works through the whole range of human discourse
 – from carefully thought-out messages to entirely spontaneous discourse.
 In my experience, I have regularly had the sense of a message “coming together”
 with a speed and clarity that were not present until a fairly definable moment,
 after which it seemed that a sermon almost wrote itself.

I have no reason not to attribute this consistent experience to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, I have seldom had such an experience until after I had spent
 a fair amount of time mulling over possible points, structures, sequences, illustrations,
 and applications, at times following almost a mechanical procedure of identifiable steps
 in sermon preparation. For me, at least it seems the Spirit works better
 when there is already something of value running around in my mind on which to build.”

[Craig Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables* (Baker, 2004) 30-31]

Step Ten: Select a handful of words to study further with a theological dictionary

for OT Hebrew word study help:

NIDOTTE: Willem A. VanGemeren (ed) *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Zondervan, 1997) 5 volumes and on CD

for NT Greek word study help:

NIDNTT: Colin Brown (ed) *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1978) 3 volumes and on CD

Step Eleven: Summarize the thrust of the passage in a single, simple sentence

‘the thesis’: “(that) short statement that expresses what you’re going to talk about and what the sermon will call the reader to do about it.” [Miller, *Preaching* (Baker, 2006) 105]

‘the big idea’ ‘the proposition’ – all good communication needs one!

“It is the thrust of the text as it relates to the listeners”

[Scharf, *prepared to Preach* (Mentor, 2005) 127]

Step Twelve: Picture a prevailing image & give it time to incubate in imagination

We want our preaching to spark the imagination and do something within the ‘theatre of the mind’. Preaching can be so propositional and word-focused. We need to think in images. So here is a good opportunity to pause and begin to identify the prevailing image which stays with you – and then your listeners - as you live in this passage.

Step Thirteen: Develop an initial, tentative shape for what you want to say

The structure of the sermon emerges from breaking the ‘single, simple sentence’ down into its constituent parts. This will come from mulling over all those appetizing discoveries which you have made and which now constitute the smorgasbord on lots of bits of paper. Pray! Reflect!

the human body: head, skeleton, flesh, ligaments, heart, and wings

the map: a city/suburb/streets...country/island/village...country/province/city

Step Fourteen: Place each ‘suburb’ at the top of a different piece of paper

Begin to work through your smorgasbord of observations and gather together those thoughts and ideas and observations which support the heading at the top of the page.

A rule of thumb: Don’t consult others until you have your own tentative outline

Step Fifteen: Consult the experts, the commentators!

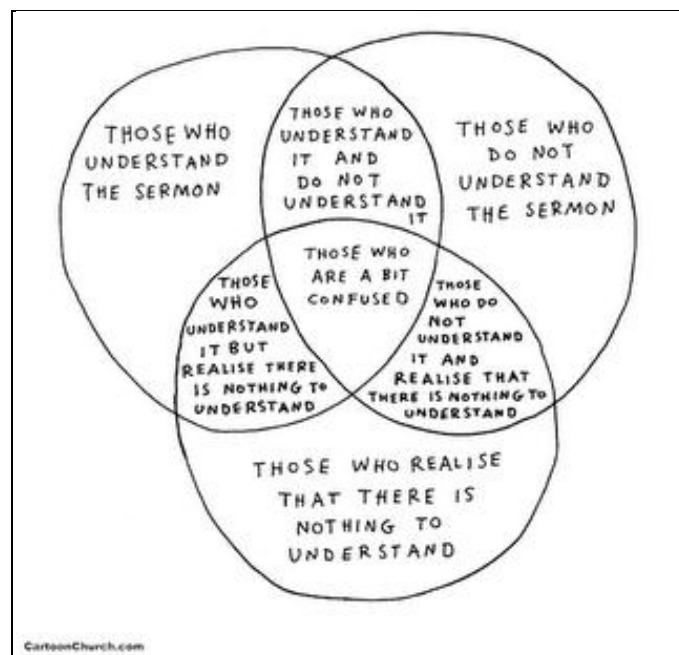
Now is the time to ask interpretive questions. Now is the time to apply. Now you are ready to raid the commentaries. You will be thrilled to discover them unpacking some of your precious insights. You will welcome them fine-tuning some of your more 'imaginative' ones. You will value their ability to fill in background and contextual information. You will feel much freer to use their insights with greater integrity, now that you have done so much of your own work in the text. Read and reflect – and add notes to your separate pages, thereby building your understanding of the passage as well as preparing your message.

A great resource, annually updated:

<http://www.denverseminary.edu/resources/the-denver-journal/>

A few comments on commentaries:

- It is usually *not* wise to buy a set of commentaries.
- Make a commitment to read *good* commentaries that have received good recommendations.
- Decide to *invest* in commentaries. Why not choose a book of the Bible for every year?! Focus on it in your devotional life, complete your observation exercises on it, use it in your ministry by preaching through it or leading studies through it . . . and spend some money to buy the best.
- As with all Christian reading, grow in your ability to *recognize* the people who handle the Scripture well and look to expand your list of names year by year.
- I learnt more from the disciplined reading of commentaries in the five years after theological training than I did in the three years of theological training – but the former could not have happened without the latter.



2. From Text to Sermon:

shaping clear, faithful, and relevant sermons

[NB: This session is cut-'n-pasted from grassroots Langham Preaching seminars done recently in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, China, Cambodia, PNG, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu...]

Assumptions...

Praying has been happening – and continues to happen!

Observing has been happening - in the text on our own with the Spirit (First Fifteen)

Understanding has been happening - in the text with the help of 'others' and the Spirit

All this yields lots of ideas and thoughts on lots of pieces of paper. It is a mess!

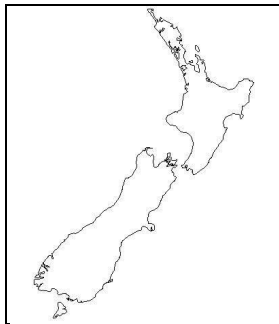
Now we must take this mess and shape it into a faithful, clear, and relevant sermon.

HOW?

Preparing a sermon from a text is like entering a country, taking a journey from province to province within the country, and stopping to spend time in three towns in each province along the way – before noticing where the country fits into the global map ... before stopping to sing the country's anthem.

- (a) There is the country-view. Working with all the ideas from 'praying, observing, and understanding' we describe the overall theme of the biblical passage. 'What is this passage about?' We write it down as a single sentence and this is our country-view. It will bring *focus* and *boundaries* to the sermon. It is simple. It is concise, and yet it is comprehensive. It describes the 'big idea' of the passage which will become the 'big idea' of the sermon.

[For an example of a country-view, consider any feature article in the newspaper...]



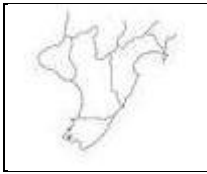
for example, a map of New Zealand

- (b) There are the provinces. Working directly from the country-view, the 'big idea' of the passage, we identify the individual provinces contained within this country-view. These smaller provinces explain the 'big idea' in more detail. Later they will become the main points in the sermon, providing the sermon with *structure* and *clarity*. There are many provinces within a country and so it can look a bit like this map:



for example, the provinces(?) in the North Island of New Zealand

But we cannot preach everything there is to preach in the passage in one sermon. Choices will need to be made. Some provinces will not be covered and so the map of the sermon will look more like this:



for example, a few provinces in the lower North Island

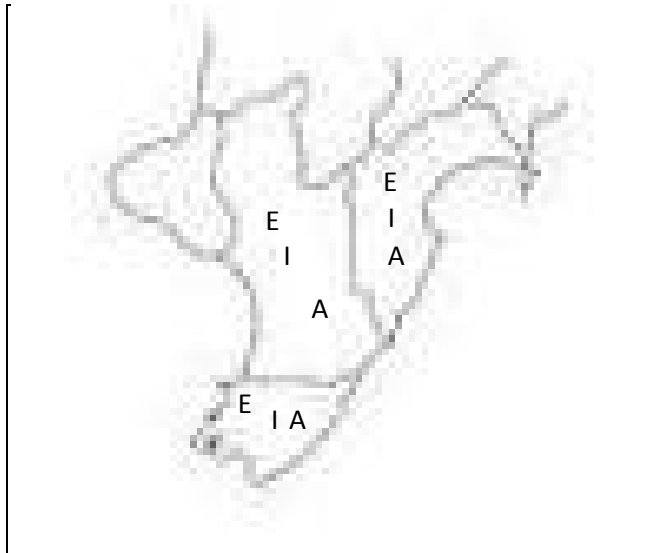
I have a little check-list of guidelines with my provinces when I preach:

- + Ensure that the provinces in the sermon are of similar size, and so given similar weight and time
- + A sermon has as many provinces as the biblical passage suggests – but try to stay between 2-5
- + Make sure that each province is affirming something different from the passage
- + Maintain the discipline of adding after the province the biblical verses from which it comes.
- + Don't be afraid to have your provinces look and sound alike.
- + Try to describe the activity taking place on the provinces – use a verb in the way you describe it

(c) There are the towns. Each province contributes something different to the country, just as each main point contributes something different to the 'big idea'. In preparing our sermon we need to visit each of these provinces and spend time there. When we arrive in a province we visit three towns, the same three towns in every single province:

- + the Explanation Town (E): where we explain what the text is saying in this province;
- + the Illustration Town (I): where we illustrate our explanation of what the text is saying in this province;
- + the Application Town (A): where we apply to our people what we have explained and illustrated.

It is by spending time in each of these towns in each of the provinces that we decide what will be said in the sermon. This provides the *content* of the sermon.



the towns: E (explaining), I (illustrating), A (applying)

The sermon is about “solid explanation vividly illustrated and powerfully applied.” (Chapell)

When we visit the *Explanation Town*, we explain what the biblical text means. Discovering what the text means for us (today) *always* starts with discovering what the text meant for them (in biblical times). The single most important feature of biblical preaching is that we keep coming back to what the text says and we explain it. The biblical passage is not a rock *from* which we dive into the sermon – it is the swimming pool *into* which we dive and swim in the sermon.

When we visit the *Illustration Town*, we are looking for comparisons from our own world which will help listeners see what the text is saying more clearly. We become like a photographer, ‘clicking’ images that we see in the world which we can use later in our preaching. A preacher is like a fisherman who ‘trawls’ life for illustrations. A bit like Jesus was with the parables, illustrating is about learning to see the spiritually significant in the ordinary and the everyday. We need to exercise our imaginations and never miss the opportunity to say “oh, that reminds me of...”

In the *Application Town*, the preacher anchors the explanation of the text within the lives of the listeners. Preaching is persuasive speech. We want to see transformation. The text is applied to their lives. We are specific. We are real. With our explanations and our illustrations we are always asking, “so what? what difference does this truth make to my people?”

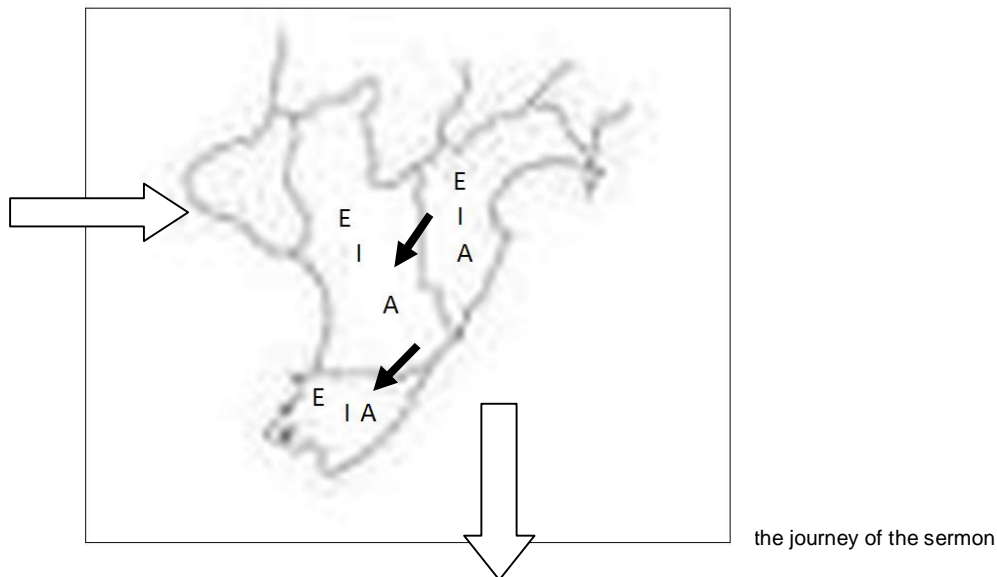
Something to think about:

What happens to a sermon when it spends too much time in the Explanation Town?

In the Illustration Town?

In the Application Town?

- (d) Let the sermon become a journey from province to province, town to town. It must flow. There must be movement. Here we think carefully about the words/phrases to use as we *transition* from one province to another and from one town to another. And we think about we will say which motivates people to join the journey into the biblical passage (the introduction) and what we will say to conclude our journey in the passage (the conclusion) – realising that this provides the last opportunity for the visit to this country to be both memorable and transformative.



- (e) We place our sermon on this biblical passage – focusing on these provinces within this country – within the *context* of the total biblical story. We reflect on where our passage fits within the flow of the Bible book in which it is located (like New Zealand placed within Oceania). If we are in the Old Testament think about how the passage has links to the New Testament and finds fulfilment there. If we are in the New Testament take time to consider the heritage of the passage in the Old Testament. Ask how Jesus will be brought into the sermon in a natural and appropriate manner. In this way our little map is seen in light of the big map of the entire world. This is the global view.



- (f) When citizens of a country sing their national anthem it is usually a time for passion and reverence. Watch the gold medal winner at the Olympic Games as their nation's flag is raised. The heart is stirred. The pulse races. The purpose of life comes into focus. Goals have been achieved and there is a sense of completion.

And so before attention turns to writing out the sermon we take time to look back over our journey through the provinces and towns of this country and the way it fits into the wider global context. Where is the pulse and purpose in this biblical passage? What is the 'big aim' that needs to emerge from the 'big idea'? What is the anthem of this passage ... and then we make sure that our sermon sings it.

*The goal is to develop sermons that are faithful, clear and relevant.
The work we do in describing the country-view, visiting the Explanation Town and finding
where our passage fits in the global map will help ensure faithfulness.
By identifying the provinces within the country and carefully journeying
through the sermon we help ensure clarity.
Then by visiting the Illustration and Application Towns and starting and finishing
the journey well we help ensure relevance.
When the completed sermon sings the anthem of the passage
under the power and direction of the Spirit of God,
the people of God will grow further into maturity
under the ministry of the Word of God.*

NB: This is *not* the only way to preach the Bible. There are other legitimate ways. But I think this is a good place to begin because it helps the preacher refine their skills with all those critical words that have been underlined: focus, boundaries, structure, clarity, content, transition, context, faithfulness, and relevance. This is a good foundation on which to build!

3. *Held by Conviction:*

demonstrating how theology is more important methodology

*"The secret is not so much in mastering certain techniques
as being mastered by certain convictions." [John Stott]*

In 50 minutes, let's build our own theology of preaching...

Your 'Top Two'	My 'Top Two'
Truth about God (theology): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • <p style="text-align: center;"><u>A key passage?</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • •
Truth about Christ (christology): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • <p style="text-align: center;"><u>A key passage?</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • •
Truth about the Spirit (pneumatology): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • <p style="text-align: center;"><u>A key passage?</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • •
Truth about the Bible (bibliology): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • <p style="text-align: center;"><u>A key passage?</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • •
Truth about the church (ecclesiology): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • <p style="text-align: center;"><u>A key passage?</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • •
Truth about history (eschatology): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • <p style="text-align: center;"><u>A key passage?</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • •

<p>Truth about the pastor:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•• <p><u>A key passage?</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">••
<p>Truth about the society-world-culture:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•• <p><u>A key passage?</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">••