

# TEACHING FIRST-YEAR PREACHING

By Sidney Greidanus

Since our theme this year is "Preparing Those Who Preach," and since my career in teaching preaching full-time is coming to a close, I would like to use this opportunity to pass on to the next generation of teachers a few valuable lessons I have learned about teaching preaching.

First, be willing to learn from others. The Christian Church has been preaching and teaching preaching for two thousand years. We do not have to re-invent the wheel but can learn from the history of preaching as well as contemporary research in homiletics. When I was appointed professor of preaching at Calvin Seminary, I asked for some funding to visit seminaries of various denominations to observe how they taught preaching. I visited the Vancouver School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary, Westminster West, Garrett Evangelical, Trinity Evangelical, Princeton, and Gordon-Conwell seminaries. Although the overall approach to teaching preaching was surprisingly similar, I was still able to incorporate valuable distinctives in my own teaching.

I also learned from other teachers. Like most professors with Ph.D's and Th.D's in their field of expertise, I never had a course in pedagogy. Although theories of preaching and theories of teaching overlap considerably, most teachers of preaching can still learn a thing or two about pedagogy. I was fortunate in being able to invite Ken Kuiper, a master teacher in English at Calvin College, to sit in on my classes and offer suggestions for improvement. Some of the things I learned from him will be reflected below.

Other sources for learning to teach preaching were the students themselves. Mandatory course evaluations sometimes provided good suggestions, but what was especially valuable for me was to sit down over lunch with a select group of students at the end of the course and ask them where and how I could improve. These students, some of them former teachers, provided some excellent suggestions for improvement. These suggestions, too, are incorporated in the remainder of this paper. The long and short of this first lesson is that one is never too old to learn and improve in teaching preaching.

Second, get to know your students' names, background and concerns as quickly as possible. I instinctively tried to get to know the first name of all my students within the first two weeks of the course. Ken Kuiper went beyond that and suggested that early in the course I invite each student to my office for a ten minute talk. As we talk, I write on a three by five card the name of the student, married status, number of children, home town, denominational affiliation, college attended, speech courses taken, former occupation, and any concerns the student may have about preaching. This simple procedure has not only increased my rapport with students but also benefited class discussions.

Third, at the start of the lecture, hand out a rather detailed outline with room for student notes. The select group of students suggested handing out outlines in order to free up more time for class discussion. This procedure has worked wonderfully well. Not only do we have more time for discussion, but every student ends up with a good set of notes. We now photocopy, spiral bind, and make the whole set of lecture outlines available to students at the beginning of the course.<sup>1</sup> Because more and more students prefer to use notebooks in class, I also provide the outlines on diskette for those who wish to download them on their computers.

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<sup>1</sup> Principles of Expository Preaching. Lecture Outlines for First-Year Preaching, 74pp.

Fourth, teach a sequence of indispensable hermeneutical/homiletical steps from text to sermon. You will find such steps taught by Haddon Robinson,<sup>2</sup> Fred Craddock,<sup>3</sup> Thomas Long,<sup>4</sup> and others. Students need to learn and adopt a logical method for moving step by step from the selected preaching text to the sermon. They should practice this method over and over, until it becomes second nature to them. One can accomplish this repetition not only by *teaching* the steps but by having students *practice* them, both individually and in teams, on a variety of texts.

At first I taught twelve steps from text to sermon, but for some students the walk seemed too long to maintain the connections. So I reduced the walk to ten steps by combining theme and goal in steps 5 and 7. Now students can reach the textual theme and goal in only five steps, and five more get them to the final sermon. Since some students failed to connect the concept of "goal" with the relevance of the biblical text and sermon, I recently added a third element to steps 5 and 7: the need addressed (see Appendix I).<sup>5</sup>

Fifth, teach a basic, but flexible, expository sermon model. When I first started teaching preaching, I left the form of the sermon up to the students. I had seen the shortcomings of imposing the didactic form on every biblical text even as a [student](#).<sup>so</sup> I did not wish to require this of my students. But at a faculty retreat on preaching, a church historian asked me, "What is the sermon form you teach and require of your students?" I answered that I did not require any specific form but left it up to the students to determine an appropriate form. My questioner responded, "Even in figure skating, students are required to show their mastery of compulsory figures before they can go on to free style. Should not the same hold true for preaching?" The faculty and I agreed on the benefits of this approach and they asked me to develop a basic expository sermon model. I developed a model and tried it myself on various texts to see if it resulted in relevant, biblical sermons. I then submitted this model to the faculty. After some fine tuning, the faculty adopted this sermon model as a requirement for all student preaching at Calvin Seminary (see Appendix II).

This required sermon model has resulted in many benefits. Students now have clearer guidelines on what is expected of them in designing and preaching sermons. Within the boundaries of these guidelines, student preachers have felt free to become much more creative. Evaluating the sermons of their peers has become more meaningful because the evaluations are no longer based on vague feelings but guided by specific criteria. And last but not least, grading the sermons has become much easier because of the clear expectations.

Sixth, ask the faculty to discuss your proposed sermon model, possibly revise it, and adopt it as a requirement for all student sermons. Faculty support has many advantages. It raises the status of your particular sermon model to the model for the school. It forces students to use the model again and again--for class sermons, on summer assignment, on internship-until it becomes second nature to them. And, I found, the whole faculty now feels more involved in the training of *preachers*. In fact, several professors now assign for their final exam not an exegetical paper or a theological

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<sup>2</sup> See his *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 151-209.

<sup>3</sup> 'See his *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 99-209.

<sup>4</sup> 'See his *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1989), 60-188.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed explanation of these steps and their application to Genesis 22, see my *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 279-318.

treatise but a sermon.

Seventh, have first-year students preach at least *two* video-taped sermons to a small group of peers. When I came to Calvin, students preached one sermon in class and then went out for a summer of preaching. I soon added a second sermon and found the benefits remarkable. On my written evaluation of the first sermon I include some specific goals for improving the second sermon; e.g., more and better eye contact, broader gestures, clearer references to and quotations of the biblical text, clearer communication of the main points, more illustrations, a conclusion that clinches the goal and then stops, etc. Almost every student showed great improvement in composing and delivering the second sermon. As a result, they felt encouraged and went out on their summer assignments with a positive attitude: with the help of the Holy Spirit. I can do this!

Eighth, develop a sound sermon evaluation form for students to evaluate each other's sermons (see Appendix III).<sup>6</sup> The evaluation form does more than inform preachers how well they did and where they should improve. The evaluation form is also a major teaching tool for the evaluators. In a small class of eight students who preach two sermons each, every student will write fourteen evaluations. If the evaluation form reflects the requirements of the sermon model, think of the multiple reinforcements of the sermon model in the minds of the students.

Ninth, develop a similar but simpler evaluation form for church members to evaluate student preaching in churches (see Appendix IV). Most church members do not know technical terms like *theme* and *goal*, so one has to inquire about these concepts in a roundabout way. Church members may not know homiletics, but they usually have a good sense whether they have heard a powerful sermon or not. Feedback from church members may not be as professional as feedback from professors and fellow students, but it is important nevertheless; after all, the church members will be the regular hearers.

Finally, encourage your students whenever possible, especially right after their preaching. A critical evaluation right after preaching can be very discouraging. To keep the focus on encouragement. I first have the preacher say something about his or her preaching. Next we discuss what we appreciated about the sermon. And finally we discuss how the sermon and its delivery could be improved. I have learned to bite my tongue and save possibly painful criticism for a one-on-one session the following day. But it remains a challenge to insist on excellence in preaching and yet encourage students when a sermon falls far below the mark. According to my latest student evaluations, I still need to keep working on encouraging our student preachers. One is never too old to learn.

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<sup>6</sup> A collection of "Sermon Critique Forms" used by various teachers of preaching are found in Don M. Wardlaw, ed., *Learning Preaching: Understanding and Participating in the Process* (The Academy of Homiletics, 1989), 269-311.

**1. Select the preaching-text.**

Select the preaching-text with an eye to congregational needs. The text must be a literary unit and contain a vital theme.

**2. Read the text in its literary context.**

Read and re-read the text in its context and jot down initial questions.

**3. Outline the structure of the text.**

In the Hebrew or Greek text, note the major affirmations, clausal flow, plot line, scenes, or literary structures. Mark major units with headings and verse references.

**4. Interpret the text in its own historical setting.**

- a. Literary interpretation;
- b. Historical interpretation;
- c. Theocentric interpretation.

Review your results with the help of some good commentaries.

**5. Formulate the text's theme, goal, and need addressed.**

- a. State the textual theme in a brief sentence that summarizes the *message* of the text for its original hearers: subject and predicate. What is the text saying?
- b. State the goal of the author for his original hearers. What is the text doing? Does the author aim to persuade, to motivate, to urge, to warn, to comfort? Be specific.
- c. State the need the author addressed--the question behind the text.

**6. Understand the message in the contexts of canon and redemptive history.**

- a. Canonical interpretation: interpret the message in the context of the whole canon;
- b. Redemptive-historical interpretation: understand the message in the context of God's redemptive history from creation to new creation;
- c. Christocentric interpretation: explore the ways of 1) redemptive-historical progression, 2) promise-fulfillment, 3) typology, 4) analogy, 5) longitudinal themes, 6) New Testament references, and 7) contrast (see *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 227-77).

**7. Formulate the sermon theme, goal, and need addressed.**

- a. Ideally, your **sermon theme** will be the same as your textual theme (Step 5a).

If Step 6 forces a change, stay as close as possible to the textual theme. Your theme will guide especially the development of the body of the sermon.

- b. Your **goal** must be in harmony with the author's goal (Step 5b) and match the sermon theme. Your goal will guide the style of the sermon as well as the content of its conclusion.
- c. State the **need** you are addressing. This need should be similar to the need addressed by the author. The need will inform the content of your introduction.

**8. Select a suitable sermon form.**

Select a sermon form that respects the form of the text (didactic or narrative.. deductive or inductive) and that achieves the goal of the sermon.

**9. Prepare the sermon outline.**

if possible, follow the flow of the text (Step 3) in the body of the sermon. Main points, derived from the text, support the theme. The introduction should expose the need. The conclusion should clinch goal.

**10. Write the sermon in oral style.**

Say it as you write it. Write in oral style, using short sentences, vivid words, strong nouns and verbs, active voice, present tense, images, and illustrations.

## Appendix II

**AN EXPOSITORY SERMON MODEL****The Sermon Manuscript**

At the top of your manuscript print your name and the following information: 1.

1. Scripture reading and text (Step I).
2. The theme, goal, and need of your text (Step 5).
3. The theme, goal, and need of your sermon (Step 7).

Write your sermon in oral style (Step 10).

Type your manuscript in a form that will aid good communication.

**A. Introduction** (usually no more than 10% of your sermon)

1. Normally, begin with an illustration of the need addressed (Step 7c).
  2. Connect this illustration to the need of the present hearers.
  3. Transition: Show that this need or a similar issue was also the question behind the biblical text.
  4. State the theme of the text/sermon (Step 7a).
- For the sake of maintaining suspense, you may postpone disclosing the theme at the beginning (inductive development), but by statement and restatement, you must make sure that the hearers catch the point of the sermon.

**B. The Sermon Body**

1. Expose the **structure of the text**.  
The main points, affirmations, moves, scenes of the text (Step 3) normally become your main points in the sermon.
2. The **main points** should usually support the theme and be of the same rank. 3.
3. Follow the **textual sequence** of the points unless there is good reason to change it, such as climactic arrangement (Step 9).
4. Use simple, **clear transitions** that enable the hearers to sense the structure of and movement in the sermon.  
E.g., "Not only... but also...."  
Or, "Let's first see.... Now we see secondly..."  
Or, "Let's look at verse 8." "Now please look with me at verse 12."
5. Use **verse references** before quoting the text so that the hearers can read along. Visual learning is nine times more effective than aural.
6. Use some personal observations to **illustrate** difficult concepts or to make the point. Personal illustrations are more natural and powerful than canned illustrations about Bishop Whately. Personal experiences may also be used but be careful not to preach yourself but Christ.

**C. Conclusion**

1. Be brief.
2. Don't introduce new material. Narrow the focus; don't expand it.
3. Clinch the goal (Step 7b).
4. Be concrete. Can you offer some concrete suggestions of what the hearers can do in response to the Word preached?

## Appendix III

## SERMON EVALUATION

Preacher \_\_\_\_\_

Evaluator \_\_\_\_\_

Please identify the strengths of the sermon and/or how it can be improved in the following areas:

**Faithfulness to the Text**

1. Interpretive reading of Scripture
2. State sermon theme:
3. State sermon goal:
4. Exposition of the text:
  - a. The text's meaning in its own historical setting
  - b. The text's meaning in the contexts of canon and redemptive history
5. Theocentric/Christocentric focus

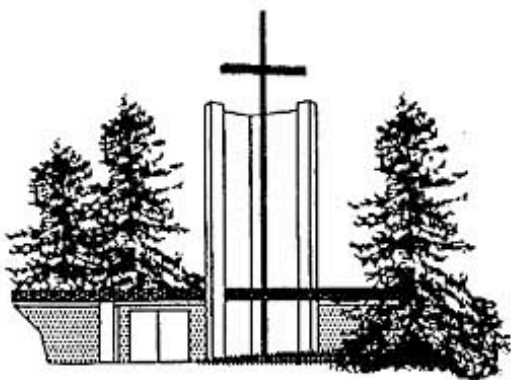
**Sermon Organization and Relevance**

1. Relevant introduction
2. Clear, smooth transitions
3. Suspense
4. List the points/moves of the sermon outline:
5. Illustrations
6. Concrete conclusion
7. Relevance/interest

**Delivery** (Check off what was good; circle and/or explain what needs work.)

1. Oral style: short sentences / simple words / present tense / active voice
2. Language: proper / vivid / inclusive / grammar / articulation
3. Voice: conversational tone / volume / pitch / speed / intensity / variety / pauses
4. Body language: posture / eye contact / gestures / movement / facial expressions
5. Vitality: sincerity / conviction / enthusiasm / humor / pastoral sensitivity / other

**Overall Impression** (circle):    Excellent    Very Good    Fair    Unsatisfactory



# Student Preaching Evaluation Form

Dear Listener,

Evaluation is an important and valuable contribution to the student's preparation for the ministry. We thank you for your willingness to complete this form. Please return it **immediately** to the address below:

Field Education Office  
Calvin Seminary  
3233 Burton SE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49546

Student's Name: .....

Church Name: .....

Date of Service: .....

Text of Sermon: .....

Title of Sermon: .....

Your Occupation: .....

Age and Gender: .....



<b>The Sermon Delivery</b>				
Clear reading of Scripture	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Below Average
Voice volume, speed, variety				
Eye contact				
Posture, gestures, facial expression				
Enthusiasm and conviction				

What was especially good about the sermon?

What could the student do to improve the sermon?

Additional comments:

<b>The Sermon Content</b>				
The sermon accurately explained the chosen text or Lord's Day.	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Below Average
The sermon presented the good news of Jesus Christ.				
The sermon was easy to follow.				
The sermon contained helpful illustrations and examples.				
The sermon was relevant for God's people today.				

State in one sentence the sermon's main idea.

What kind of response did the sermon call for?

<b>The Whole Service</b>	<b>Excellent</b>	<b>Very Good</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Below Average</b>
The student led the service confidently and pastorally.				
The service flowed smoothly without excessive explanation.				
The congregational prayer was meaningful.				

What did the student do particularly well in leading the service?

What could the student do differently to improve?