

# How To Prepare And Preach An Expository Message

By Tim Keller, *“Preaching – Communicating Faith In An Age Of Skepticism”*

Many of the books over the years written on how to write an expository message reveal a surprising consensus. They all include the following 4 directives:

1. Discern the **goal** of the text by itemizing all the things that it says and looking for the main idea that all the other ideas support.
2. Choose a main **theme** for the sermon that presents the central idea of the text and ministers to your specific listeners.
3. Develop an **outline** around the sermon theme that fits the passage, with each point raising insights from the text itself, and has movement toward a climax.
4. **Flesh out** each point with arguments, illustrations, examples, images, other supportive Bible texts, and most important, practical application.

## 1. DISCERN THE GOAL OF THE TEXT:

- What does the author of the text want his original hearers to learn, think, feel, and do?
- Discern main ideas from minor.

There are several go-arounds with the passage you need to take:

**Round One:** Read the English text over a couple times, writing your own writing commentary. Note anything that strikes you or raises a question.

**Round Two:** Read it over a couple more times. Look for **three basic categories** of things:

- a) **repetitions** of words, ideas, or grammatical forms.
- b) **Connector words**, e.g. ‘therefore’ ‘because’, ‘for’ ‘since’, ‘if’, ‘then’. These help show the **structure** of the passages – clauses, sentences, paragraphs
- c) Any **metaphors** or images.

**Round Three:** Read the passage through again with commentaries and other tools that connect you with the original language. I try to do 5 things in this round.

- a) Determine the meaning of each significant word
- b) See if there is any repetition that has been masked by the English translation
- c) Use commentaries to seek answers to anything in the text that puzzled you
- d) Use reference tools to closely study the images
- e) Look for anything that alludes to or quotes from other places in the Bible

**Round Four:** Ask the **context questions** about your text. Look at context of the passage within the book first. Then ask how this text and book fits in with the rest of the Bible.

**What doctrines** does it touch?

**What themes** run through the whole canon? Most crucially, **which themes point to or find their fulfillment in Christ?**

Finally, you should settle on one concluding ‘goal of the text’ that pulls all your findings together. ‘What is the one thing that all the other things are about?’

To force yourself to distill all your material, give your passage a **title**.

## 2. CHOOSE YOUR THEME FOR THE SERMON

Choose a theme that presents the central ideas of the text while addressing your listeners in particular. Even if the central idea is unambiguous (and it is not always so), *that does not mean there can be only one theme for the sermon*. **The central text idea can usually be faithfully presented through any variety of themes.**

Exercise sensitivity here. Sinclair Ferguson: “The preacher is not a systematic theologian...He is a pastor...Our preaching...must be *people-oriented*.” **The central text idea and the pastoral aim together produce the sermon theme.**

Alan Stibbs gives John 2 as an example: The main idea is in verse 11 – the miracle showed Jesus’ glory by pointing to his death, which purifies us and secures our festal joy. But we can highlight this main idea through different sermon themes:

- 1) A wedding, e.g. invite Jesus to your wedding;
- 2) Prayer meeting: vs. 3, ‘They have no more wine’ could lead to a teaching ‘Why and How To Pray’;
- 3) An address to Christian leaders: vs.5 “Do whatever he tells you”, on a talk on ‘How To Be Useful In Christ’s Work’;
- 4) A Sunday sermon to a broad audience, vs.10 ‘You have saved the best wine for last’ the theme could be “The Joy That Jesus Brings”

Alec Moyer: **We have two responsibilities when we preach: First to the truth, and secondly to the particular group of people we address.**

We might want to choose our sermon theme after answering 3 questions:

- 1) **Main text idea question:** What is the text talk about? What does it say about what it is talking about?
- 2) **Pastoral aim question:** What practical difference did this teaching make to the author’s readers, and should it make to us?
- 3) **Christ question:** How does the text point us to Christ?

## 3. DEVELOP AN OUTLINE AROUND THE THEME

Many preachers from the past didn’t do outlines but gave running commentary on consecutive verses. It was not until Middle Ages that outlines became customary. The Puritans developed a very scholastic, classical outline for each sermon, with a single proposition, a rigorous analysis of it, and an exhaustive defense and application of it. Over the last 200 years, consensus about an outlines suggests:

- It should have **Unity**, with each point supporting the main theme
- It should have **Proportion**, with each point given roughly equal time.
- It should have **Order**, which each point building on the other points.
- And finally **Movement** – it should give the people a sense they are being taken somewhere, building to some kind of climax, where they are brought face-to-face with God.

**Every point in your outline should progressively clarify or justify your theme, so that it becomes clearer, richer, and more compelling as the sermon goes on.** In this way the outline provides not only order but also discipline – it forces you to practice the crucial art of knowing what to leave out.

**The outline also helps you ensure that your main points in the sermon come from the text itself.**

Example #1: Mark 2:1-12, the healing of the paralytic. The outline might be: 1) The Need For Forgiveness; 2) The Grace of Forgiveness; 3) The Cost Of Forgiveness

Example #2: Psalm 51 (227) from Alec Motyer. 1) What Sin Is; 2) What We Need From God For It; 3) What We Should Say To God To Receive It. Or: 1) We aren't what we ought to be; 2) Why we aren't what we ought to be; 3) What we can do about it.

**Your outline has to have movement, progression, tension.** I hear many sermons that are simply a string of good thoughts...invariably tedious. In your sermon you must build some suspense that creates an eagerness to hear what is coming next. Skillful preachers can state earlier points in such a way that it will cause questions to be raised in listener's minds.

**Eugene Lowry says points of the sermon should feel like the parts of a narrative.** A narrative begins when something knocks life off balance. As the story proceeds the central characters fight to restore the balance. Therefore the sermon should follow this pattern:

- Present the problem.
- Develop tension by looking under the surface at the reasons why the problem is so difficult and enduring.
- Recapitulate the gospel message that we do not have the resources to save ourselves. 3
- Show how Jesus, his salvation and faith in him solves the problem before us.

This is why the sermon, if it moves like a narrative, can produce what Tolkien calls '*the turn*', that is present in all good stories. A reversal, an upending of normal expectations, and a sudden plot resolution that is counterintuitive and satisfying.

***Important: If when analyzing the fallen condition, you depict the problem as a matter of behavior, then the only solution will be some exhortation to try harder. Unless you get down to the level of heart dynamics and motivation, the transforming power of the gospel won't be seen as unique.***

#### **4. FLESH OUT EACH POINT**

Finally you must flesh out each of your outline's points with a rich variety of arguments, illustrations, examples, images, other supportive biblical texts, and other forms of practical application and rhetorical devices. The number and character of these things depends on the choices you have made previously about the goal of the passage, your theme, and the structure of your outline.