

# How to Develop Sermon Subjects

## I. Introduction:

This is a very broad subject. We all have varied experiences, training, background, etc. What would work for one man may not work for another. Some men are more logical and methodical than others are. Some men have more access to books and other helps. Some men are familiar with the original languages of Scripture to one degree or another, while others are only familiar with the translations in their native tongues. Some men have been preaching for years and have a vast reservoir of Scriptural knowledge and life experience from which to draw. Some men have been preaching to a particular congregation for years, while others are newly come to a congregation. Individual congregations have different make-ups. Some may have many young families. Others may have a large percentage of older people. Some congregations are rural and some are urban.

Each man has to develop his own method of **selection, preparation, and delivery** of sermons as he prayerfully searches the Scriptures and seeks the face of God in prayer. It is better for each man to “be himself” rather than try to imitate others. This is not to say that we cannot and should not closely observe others and benefit by following good examples. But no man should slavishly try to imitate another. God has given to each of us unique gifts. This can be seen in 1 Cor. 12: 11, where, speaking of the distribution of spiritual gifts, Paul says, “But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.” The word translated “severally” is *idiaj* (idios). This means, “pertaining to one's self, one's own, belonging to one's self.” As John Gill says about the dispensing activity of the Holy Spirit in this verse, “so his gifts, ordinary and extraordinary, are severally distributed, according to his sovereign will and pleasure.”

The knowledge of this should exclude jealousy and dissatisfaction from us as we preachers work together in preaching the glorious gospel of the blessed God. All the various kinds of true gifts of God are needed in His churches. One man, with a particular type of gift, may be able to reach someone that another could not reach. The reverse is also true. We should not exercise our God-given gifts in rivalry. Our gifts should complement each other. We must remember what is said in 1 Peter 4:11, “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do **it as of the ability which God giveth**: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.”

The man who is truly called of God and has an extensive formal education is needed. However, the man who does not have much formal schooling, but who has been gifted by God, also has a vital place in the work of the gospel. The Lord Jesus called men of varying backgrounds to preach. Many of them were fishermen, of whom it was said “that they were unlearned and ignorant men.” This does not mean that the apostles were stupid. They just did not have formal training in the schools of the day. According to Thayer, the word translated “unlearned” means they were “unversed in the learning of the Jewish schools.” The word translated “ignorant” means “a person without professional knowledge, unskilled, uneducated.” We must remember that our Lord Jesus did not have much formal education. Concerning our dear Lord, “the Jews marvelled, saying, How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?”

(John 7: 15). Commenting on this verse John Gill says, “that is, he had not had a liberal education, but was brought up to a trade; he was not trained up at the feet of any of their Rabbins, in any of their universities, or schools of learning...” On the other hand, some of the disciples were men of much formal education. Paul and Luke are two good examples.

## The Avoidance of Extremes

In my opinion, in the matter of theological education there are two extremes to be avoided. One extreme is to put a premium on ignorance. Sadly, some Primitive Baptists have done that in days past. When we had the split with the Modern Mission Movement in the early 1800’s in the United States, we rightly took a stand against Theological Seminaries. There are simply no such seminaries in the New Testament. However, some of our brethren went to extremes and began to denigrate much education of any kind. Some of them virtually quit studying in any systematic manner and just preached whatever text happened to come to mind. Not every preacher was guilty of this, but this type thing was pervasive. Many men were guilty of not preaching all the counsel of God. Our people greatly suffered from this lack.

On the other hand, we have some people among us today who tend to overreact to this neglect of study. They don’t think a man can preach unless he has an extensive formal education. Some of them seek theological degrees from religious organizations that do not preach the truth about many Biblical basics. I believe that this is potentially dangerous. It would be very easy for a man to almost unconsciously imbibe subtle error from a persuasive and impressive teacher who is tainted with error. The Lord knew what He was doing when He did not set up formal schools of theology. If we try to “second guess” Him we do so to our own peril. I am not against a man reading books written by those who are not Primitive Baptists. I am not against a man “gleaning” even from some formal theological study. I myself have studied New Testament Greek up to the intermediate level in two theological schools. However, I believe extreme caution should be exercised when a man pursues such a course.

## The Biblical Way

According to the Scriptures the church is the “pillar and ground of the truth.” (1 Tim. 3: 15). Also according to the Scriptures the New Testament way of training ministers of the gospel is the **apprenticeship method**. A young gift is to study under a man who has been in the ministry for some time. This is plainly taught in 2 Tim. 2: 2, where Paul instructed Timothy, “And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.” This was obviously to be done in the context of the local church, which is the pillar and ground of the truth. There is not a hint of a Bible College or a Theological Seminary in the pages of the New Testament.

I am thankful to see an interest in proper ministerial education in my day. I know several older, established ministers who are diligently trying to help younger ministers whom God is raising up in the churches they serve. I believe that one reason the New Testament does not condone seminaries is because a seminary education, particularly a theological academic degree, can easily lead to pride and to the sense that a man with a degree is somehow superior to his brethren who are not so formally trained. I really believe that the Lord Jesus was referring to this sort of thing when He said in Matthew 23:8-10, “But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ.” Speaking of the title of “rabbi,” John Gill said, “Do not be ambitious of any such title, fond of it, or affect it, or be elated with it, should it be given you...” I realize that Gill, himself, was awarded an honorary doctor’s degree by a university, but he said that he “neither thought it, sought it, nor bought it!” We ministers of the gospel must ever keep in mind that according to Romans 1:1 we have been “**separated** unto the gospel of God” not **elevated** to it above our brethren.

### **The Bottom Line**

When considering the development of sermons I believe that there are several basic things that should characterize each of us, no matter what is our background or level of education.

First, we should each do the **very best** that we can possible do. There is no place in the gospel ministry for a lazy or self-indulgent man. When the Lord Jesus was exhorting the disciples to pray that God would raise up preachers of the gospel He said in Matthew 9:38, “Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth **labourers** into his harvest.” Paul said in speaking of ministers of the gospel, 1 Thessalonians 5:12, “And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which **labour** among you...” The word translated “labour” here is *kopia,w* (*kopiao*), and means “to grow weary, tired, exhausted (with toil or burdens or grief).” This is the same word used referring to ministers of the gospel in 1 Timothy 5:17, “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.” Brethren, if we are not working hard at preparing to preach, we are not pleasing God.

Another basic is that we must live a life in close fellowship with God. We are not like **Greek orators**, who made a profession of making beautiful speeches. We are more like **Hebrew prophets** who come from the presence of God with weighty divine truths. Our words may be beautiful but they will lack power and conviction if our lives are not what they ought to be. We must be **men of prayer**. Only then will we have the assistance of the blessed Holy Spirit as we try to find the meaning of God’s Word to preach to His people. It is significant that prayer and preaching are brought together in Acts 6:4, “But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.”

We must not allow sin to dominate our lives. Paul instructed the young preacher in 1 Timothy 4:16, “Take heed **unto thyself**, and **unto the doctrine**; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.”

The final basic element in the development of sermons is that we must **preach the Word**. Paul made this plain in 2 Timothy 4:2, “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke,

exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.” We are not to preach contemporary politics. We are not to preach the latest ideas of sociologists, psychologists, etc. We are not to preach our dreams or our own ideas. I love the way Peter expressed this. He said, “we have not followed cunningly devised fables...” Instead of these fables he had declared the “more sure word of prophecy...” (2 Pet. 2: 16, 19). No matter what our method of sermon preparation, our material must be none other than the **all-sufficient, inspired word of the living God!**

## **The Actual Development of Sermons**

### a. The Acquisition of Material.

We should always be looking for sermon topics. I suggest developing the habit of carrying around a little notebook in which to record ideas for sermons. As we read through the Scriptures in our regular, habitual reading the Lord will cause certain subjects to almost “leap out” at us from the page. We might get ideas from a book we happen to be reading. Write them down for later study. In visiting in the homes of our members we may become aware of questions or situations which need to be addressed from the Scriptures. There may be social issues that touch on morality that we need to address. We might get ideas for sermons in discussions with fellow ministers. After all the Scriptures say in Proverbs 27:17, “Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.” I cannot overemphasize the value of writing things down. We forget all too easily.

One way to find material for sermons is to ask the Lord to show us what the needs of our people are as we pray over their names in our regular prayers for those whom God has placed in our care.

There are some **basics** that we need to address over and over in our preaching. Any Primitive Baptist minister who is worthy of the name should be able to at any time preach extemporaneously on the basic doctrines of salvation. Each of us should memorize and study at least ten passages of Scripture on such doctrines as Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Particular Redemption, Irresistible Grace, and Final Preservation.

One of the best ways to preach the Word is to preach through books of the Bible. There are many advantages to this kind of preaching. One is that we are forced to face issues that arise in the course of our going through the book. There is more likelihood that in preaching entire books that we will really be preaching all the counsel of God. The Holy Spirit wrote the Bible just as it should have been written and we cannot improve upon that. The first book I ever preached through was Philippians. This was a very profitable and enjoyable experience. While I was preaching through the epistle I memorized it and wrote a commentary on it.

Another good source of sermon material is **biographical studies** of some of the people in the Scriptures. Barnabas, in the New Testament and Abraham in the Old Testament would be good examples. Much can be learned by studying the lives and character traits of Biblical characters.

As you can see there is no end to sermon material for the man who is diligently seeking. Again, I cannot overemphasize the importance of writing everything down and of having some kind of filing system. I suggest at least two ways to file material. Have a file that corresponds with each book of the Bible. Put pertinent material there. Over the years this file will grow as you continually find new material. This file will become more and more valuable to you. Also have an alphabetical file in which you record

material on certain subjects. In this way your various study materials will be well organized and you will be able to easily locate any information that you need.

b. Development of the material you have acquired:

After you have decided what to speak on you must study the material and get it in a suitable form to preach. One thing is imperative. We must exercise **exegesis** in our approach rather than **eisegesis**. In the exegetical approach we are trying **to get out of Scripture** what is there. We are trying to interpret the thoughts of the inspired Bible writers. We are not trying to add anything of our own to what they wrote. Exegesis is purely a reproductive process. We are trying to reproduce in our own minds the thoughts of the inspired writers. This involves absolutely no original thoughts of our own as we reverently approach the Word of God. We want to know exactly what God has said to us through His inspired writers.

**Eisegesis**, which is an improper method of Biblical interpretation, involves reading into the Scriptures things that are not there. Some people take an extreme allegorical approach to Scripture and come up with ridiculous interpretations. Others claim to find some “hidden meaning” in the Bible that only they can see. With this kind of faulty interpretation the Scriptures can be twisted to mean anything and everything. This kind of false interpretation is what is under consideration in 2 Pet. 3: 16, where the apostle, in speaking of those who mishandled the words which Paul had written under inspiration said, “As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable **wrest**, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.” The word translated “wrest” originally meant to torture someone.

Metaphorically it came to mean, “to pervert, of one who wrests or tortures language in a false sense.” John Gill said that when these people mishandle the word of God they “distort it from its true sense and meaning, and make it speak that which it never designed...”

Exegesis takes much hard study and much prayer. In approaching a passage of Scripture we always must take it in its context. That is, we must consider the entire passage of which it is a part. When considering a particular verse we need to examine the entire chapter of which that verse is a part. Then we want to examine the entire book of which that chapter is a part. We must consider such things as who the writer is, to whom the book is being written, the purpose for which it was written, etc. When possible we must examine the historical setting of the writing. For example, when studying the book of Philippians it is greatly enlightening to go to the sixteenth chapter of Acts to read of the founding of the church at Philippi. The last chapter of Acts tells the place from and the conditions under which the epistle was written. 2 Cor. 8:1, 9:2, 4; 11:9, and other passages give pertinent information on the province of Macedonia, of which Philippi was a part. This kind of Bible study takes time, work, and prayer. However it is a joy to one who is truly called of God to preach His infallible word!

After the exegete considers the context, historical setting, and such things, he must do extensive word studies. It is amazing how the study of one word can produce thrilling results. I will give one example. In 2 Peter 1:1 we read, “Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that **have obtained** like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ...” The word translated “obtained” is from *lagca,nw* (*lagchano*). This word means, “to receive by divine allotment.” In the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* the following is said about this word: “The attainment is not by one’s own effort or as a result of one’s own exertions, but is like ripe fruit falling into one’s lap.” Speaking of the use of this word in the passage under consideration the same source says, “In this sentence the point is that faith has come to them from God with no co-operation on

their part. That faith is the work, not of man, but of God...” This is exciting for those of us who believe in the doctrine of God’s Sovereign Grace including the glorious doctrine of Unconditional Election!

**Brethren, proper Bible study will bring joy and satisfaction to us as we prepare sermons, and it will bring joy and satisfaction to the people of God when we preach what we have studied with the power of the Holy Spirit!** Let us rededicate ourselves to “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2 Tim. 2: 15).

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