Improving Your Teaching Ministry

Exegesis and Sermon Structure

Detailed Outline  
Part 2 of 3

IV. Building an Outline

The first place to start is with building a simple and clear outline. The outline is the bones of your sermon. It is not the job of the listener to figure out what you're saying. It is your job to make what you are saying and all the material you have studied and put together clear and present it to your listeners so they don’t get lost.

The outline will manage your material, it will keep you on track, and it will make listening much easier. It is very essential that you understand the importance of a good, strong outline.

A. Keep It Clear and Simple

1. Illustration: When I first started to be a preacher as a very young man, my wife was really my best critic. One of her first criticisms of me was this: “Alex, I couldn't follow you today. You did not have a clear logical outline.” She would remind me and say, “You know, that is not a good sermon because I had to work too hard to figure out what you were talking about.” As I said, she was my best critic, and I believe that she was right.

2. Illustration: One time, more recently, my wife and I were at another church and we were listening to this speaker. I leaned over to my wife and said, “Honey, what is he talking about?” She leaned over to me and said, “I don’t know. You’re the preacher!” The speaker had very good thoughts, and he said some good things. But there was no flow of development or structure. It was too much work for the listeners, and most people just fell asleep.

3. Whenever I am preparing for a message, and I am reading the commentaries, I’ve meditated on the passage, I’ve worked the passage over, I always have a note pad. You may prefer to use your computer. But on my note pad, I work on my outline. As I’m studying and reading the passage, I’m always working with a good, logical, simple outline.

B. Make Your Headings Parallel

Your outline should be written in very clear, parallel thoughts. If you want to use two words, “study love,” “teach love,” and “model love” would be an example. They are parallel.

If you will look at the passage we are using as an example, I want you to see the outline I have used. Notice carefully how I use parallel thoughts and parallel sentences to present the material. I've entitled the message “Six Lessons in Prayer.” Look at the outline on the next page.
SIX LESSONS IN PRAYER
Ephesians 6:18-20

Lesson One: Always Be Creative in Your Prayer Life—“with all prayer and petition”

Lesson Two: Always Be in a Spirit of Prayer—“pray at all times”

Lesson Three: Always Be Praying in the Power of the Spirit—“in the Spirit”

Lesson Four: Always Be Watching and Praying—“Be on the alert with all perseverance and petition”

Lesson Five: Always Be Praying for Others—“for all the saints”

Lesson Six: Always Be Praying for Missionaries and the Gospel
- Pray for clarity in the Gospel
- Pray for courage

1. Did you notice how easy that is to follow? You’re looking at these points and you can figure the whole sermon out. The outline builds anticipation, and it holds all the material together.

2. This outline is something that the listeners can remember and take home with them.

3. I always tell people they are welcome to use my outlines. If you want to use someone else’s outline, that is fine. But you need to acknowledge that it is their work or it is plagiarism. In some cases, you may have to call and get permission. But in many cases, it is out there for people to use. Just acknowledge that you took the outline from someone else, because you could not improve upon it.

4. If you prepare your own outline, it is better for you. And remember that the outline should represent the text of Scripture. You don’t want to be so creative that no one can figure out what it has to do with the text of Scripture.

C. Have a Strong Introductory Sentence

1. You have finished your outline. Now, right after your main outline point, you want a good, strong sentence that leads right into what the main point is.

2. Do not wander around or get off track. Move right to the theme, the main point that you want to make under each major heading.

3. Have a nice, clear statement of that main point.

4. Don’t over-speak or over-use words. Be concise. People like that, and it makes the sermon more interesting.

(next page)
V. The Body of the Message

Let’s look at the body of the message. We started with the bones, or the outline.

A. Title

1. Your title should tell people what you're talking about and focus them on the main point. For our example, I used a very elementary title. I called it, “Six Lessons in Prayer.” It might even be too simple for most people.

2. Some people are more creative. They would like something like “I Prayed til I Dropped” or “I Broke My Knees Praying So Much,” “I Have Camel Knees.” Those are all very creative titles, and if that is what you like to do, that’s fine.

3. I like something simple but that allows my listener to grasp right away what the sermon is about.

B. Introduction

1. The purpose of the introduction is to capture the audience’s attention and interest, and then introduce the theme and the subject. John Broadus once quipped, “Well-begun is half done, and ill-begun is apt to be wholly ruined.”

2. Your introduction is important, but this is where many people make a big mistake. I have seen people take 20 minutes for an introduction. That means they won’t have time for their whole sermon. So the preacher will get halfway through the sermon or near the end, and then he’ll run out of time and won’t be able to finish. The reason for this is he didn’t take control of the sermon at the beginning.

3. If you want a review of last week’s sermon, keep it nice and short and succinct. Don’t go on and on with the review. You will bury your listener and it will be boring to most people.

4. If you want to use an illustration or a story, that is fine. Don’t let it get out of control. Remember you’re just introducing the material, and you’re raising interest.

5. Personally, I like to move through my introduction rapidly and not spend much time on it.

C. Sub-Points

You have your outline and your different parallel thoughts that are easy to remember and easy to follow. You now want sub-points. You’ve made a nice, clear statement for each major point that you will make. Now you start breaking down the material you have into sub-points. In the example, I used sub-points in the last heading because Paul has two requests, that he’ll be bold and that he’ll be clear in the message. These became two nice sub-points.

You want your sub-points to be clear. The purpose of the main points and their sub-points is to follow the development of your message and your flow of thought. You do not want to lose your listener! Therefore, you break down your material into these sub-points that are following the text and make your train of thought easier to follow.
D. **Illustrations and Applications**

After you have your outline, your sub-points, and the body of your material from your reading and your study, you need to place illustrations and applications in the right places in your sermon. If you like to use personal and practical suggestions or helps, those are important to indicate too. This way you know right where everything fits in the sermon.

E. **Conclusion and Response**

1. I call this “landing the plane.” Some people are good at “taking off” – good introduction, good major points, nice flow of development, good illustrations – but they can’t land the plane. Instead, they circle the airport.

2. The conclusion is important! You bring your sermon to a conclusion and that is where you focus on the audience.

3. I personally like to have a response, either in silent prayer or a song or asking the audience to respond to a particular aspect of the message. I believe it is a very good thing to have a conclusion that causes audience response.

That is basic structure. There is so much more that can be said about this. A book that is very helpful is Jack Hughes’ book, *Expository Preaching with Word Pictures*. The author explains what expository preaching is. He’ll give you excellent illustrations, and he’ll show you how to get illustrations from the text and from key words. I recommend this book for building the body of your sermon.