

**Preaching Clinic for Elders**  
**First Reformed Presbyterian Church (PCA)**  
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Session #2 – The Importance of One Main Point

1. This is Homiletics 101.

a. "It might seem quite unnecessary to urge the importance of unity in a discourse, but it is very often neglected in practice, particularly in text sermons and expository sermons, which are frequently made up of two or three little sermons in succession. Whether the unity be of a doctrinal proposition, of an historical person, or of a practical design, in some way there must be unity" (John Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, 97).

b. "There is no danger of an excess of unity and method in a sermon. The closer and more compact the materials, the simpler and more symmetrical the plan, the better the sermon" (W.G.T. Shedd, *Homiletics and Pastoral Theology*, 96).

c. "You start with trying to figure out what you want to say. This sounds easy and obvious, but is not always. We're human and tend to have lots of thoughts (often scattered) and more than a few opinions, ideas and insights."

"You have to winnow it down. Once you do you're half way home, for *it is harder to decide what you want to say than it is to figure out how to say it*.... You should stick to one subject.... [I]f you try to cram everything in the result won't be comprehensive but jumbled.... [A] *speech about everything is a speech about nothing*.... When you are thinking about what you want to say, it is often helpful to define it down, in your own mind, to a sentence or two" (Peggy Noonan, *On Speaking Well*, 16, 17, 18). "It is simplicity that gives a speech its power" (50). When constructing the main point of a sermon remember, "Good hard simple words with good hard clear meanings are good things to use when you speak" (51).

d. "He must aim to pervade it [the sermon] with but one leading idea, to embody in it but one doctrine, and to make it teach but one lesson.... The importance of this maxim may best be seen by considering the fact, that sermons are more defective in unity of structure, and a constant progress toward a single end, than in any other respect" (Shedd, 147).

e. "There are two concepts that we, as preachers, will have in hand before starting an outline. The first of these is a controlling idea for the sermon. 'No preacher has the right to look for points until he has the point.' From all the study, exegesis, and reflection on the biblical passage, what idea has emerged as the one needing to be preached? When all is said and done on a Sunday, what one idea do you want the congregation to have heard? This has also been called the thesis, or proposition, or focus idea of the sermon. [I call it the homiletical point] If we do not know what we want to say, it will be hard to develop a good way to say it" (Michael Duduit, *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, 163).

f. "It is only when a preacher knows he is saying what the Holy Spirit said, for the purpose of the Holy Spirit in saying it, that he speaks with power and authority.... This matter of purpose is such an important consideration in preaching that if your wife were to awaken you on Sunday morning at 4 o'clock and ask, 'What is the purpose of this morning's message?' you ought to be able to rattle it off in one crisp sentence, roll over and go to sleep again, all without missing a single stroke in your snoring! Indeed, I think it would be

advisable for you to write out at the top of every sermon outline (I'll discuss the purpose of the sermon outline later) a one sentence purpose statement. Until you can capsule the purpose of a sermon in one crisp sentence, you probably do not have it clearly enough fixed in your own mind—even if you think you do" (Jay Adams, *Preaching with Purpose*, 30-31).

g. "Nothing is more important than that we should be sure we have got the main thrust of the text, and let that come out.... I cannot over emphasize the importance of our arriving at the main thrust, the main message of our text. Let it lead you, let it teach you. Listen to it and then question it as to its meaning, and let that be the burden of your sermon" (D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 203-204.)

h. "As we continue to meditate by prayer and study, and jot down a miscellany of ideas, we should be looking for our text's dominant thought. Indeed we should persevere in meditation until it emerges and clarifies. Why so?

First, because every text has a main theme....

Then there is a second reason we should look for each text's dominant thought, namely that one of the chief ways in which a sermon differs from a lecture is that it aims to convey only one major message" (John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, 224-225).

i. Stott quotes Charles Simeon, "Reduce your text to a simple proposition, and lay that down as the warp; and then make use of the text itself as the woof; illustrating the main idea by the various terms in which it is contained. Screw the word into the minds of your hearers. A screw is the strongest of all mechanical powers . . . when it has turned a few times, scarcely any power can pull it out" (Stott, 226).

And J. H. Jowett, "I have the conviction that no sermon is ready for preaching . . . until we can express its theme in a short, pregnant sentence as clear as crystal. I find the getting of that sentence is the hardest, the most exacting and the most fruitful labor in my study . . . I do not think a sermon ought to be preached, or even written, until the sentence has emerged, clear and lucid as a cloudless moon" (Stott, 226).

j. "*Unity* is necessary to every work of art—to the oration, the drama, the poem, the painting, the architectural structure, the statue.... There is no canon of rhetoric more universally admitted than this, which demands unity in discourse....

Affirmatively, rhetorical unity requires these two things. The speaker must, first, have one main subject to the discourse, to which he adheres with supreme reference throughout. But this is not enough. He must, second, propose to himself one definite impression on the hearer's soul, to the making of which everything in the sermon is bent.... Unity of discourse requires, then, not only singleness of dominant subject, but also a singleness of practical impression. To secure the former, see to it that the whole discussion may admit of reduction to a single proposition. To secure the latter, let the preacher hold before him, through the whole preparation of the sermon, the one practical effect to be produced upon the hearer's will" (R. L. Dabney, *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric*, 108, 109, and 110).

k. "*How many things is a sermon about? One!* Sermons of any significant length contain many theological concepts, illustrative material, and corroborative facts. These many components, however, should not imply that a sermon is about many things. Each feature of a well-wrought message reflects, refines, and/or develops one major idea. This major idea or, or theme, glues the message together and makes all its features stick in the listener's mind. All the features of the entire sermon should support the concept of the unified whole....

*Speakers Need Focus*

We need unity to funnel the infinite exegetical possibilities [of the text] into a manageable message [sermon]....

*Listeners Need Focus*

Sermons are for listeners, not readers.... All good communication requires a theme. If the preacher does not provide a unifying concept for the message, listeners will. They instinctively will supply some thought peg on which to hang the preacher's ideas knowing that if they do not, they will retain nothing" (Bryan Chapell, *Christ Centered Preaching*, 36-37).

- I. See Steven Lawson, *The Expository Genius of John Calvin*, 69-70.
2. The Sermon Preparation Procedure therefore involves deriving meaning by
  - a. Determining the Exegetical Point of the Text with Subject and Complement.
    - (1) The Subject of the Text answering the question: What is the text about?
    - (2) The Complement of the Text answering the question: What does the text tell us about the subject?
    - (3) Combine the Subject and complement to derive the Exegetical Point.
    - (4) As an exercise, consider Psalm 100.
    - (5) Consider John 3:16, Romans 1:16-17, and Acts 20:28.
  - b. Another aspect of meaning is significance and from two perspectives:
    - (1) The significance of the text within the biblical context, and
    - (2) The significance in the contemporary context in your world.
    - (3) Considering significance directs you toward application.
    - (4) Consider Mark 13:1-2.

## THE EXPOSITORY GENIUS OF JOHN CALVIN

for the story to be unfolded and explained. His sermons covered anywhere from one verse to sixteen. Appendix A (page 134) lists the verse divisions Calvin used in preaching through the first thirteen chapters of 2 Samuel.

Another example is the layout of Calvin's preaching through the book of Micah (Appendix A), which is prophetic literature. In this expository series, Calvin preached anywhere from two to eight verses per sermon. The verse division depended on the flow of the sentences, the unit of thought, and what he desired to emphasize.

Yet another example of Calvin's sequential exposition was his preaching through the book of Ephesians. This was a noteworthy series, in part because no less than John Knox, the famous Scottish Reformer, was among Calvin's listeners. These sermons on Ephesians were at Knox's side when he died in Scotland. During this forty-eight-sermon series, Calvin preached as few as two verses, but no more than six (Appendix A), making the divisions as he felt appropriate to a proper understanding of Paul's teaching. These smaller verse divisions allowed for a meaty treatment of each particular passage.

T. H. L. Parker observes: "[Calvin's] text will vary in length from a single verse to a whole passage of perhaps ten or a dozen verses. Not infrequently he will preach two or three consecutive sermons on one verse. . . . But the general rule was for two to four verses a sermon."<sup>4</sup> Parker adds, "Clause by clause, verse by verse, the congregation was led through the epistle or the

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prophecy or the narrative."<sup>5</sup> As a result, Calvin's sermons are not "mealy-mouthed commonplaces or sermons which he had up his sleeves to make them serve all passages of the Scripture, like a shoe for all feet, but expositions, true, pure, plain, and proper for the text which he had to explain."<sup>6</sup>

## DISTINCTIVE NO. 13: EXEGETICAL PRECISION

Calvin insisted that the words within each specific passage were to be considered in their historical context and grammatical structure. In so doing, he sought to unfold the author-intended meaning of Scripture. Schaff notes: "Calvin is the founder of the modern grammatico-historical exegesis. He affirmed . . . the sound and fundamental hermeneutical principle that the biblical authors, like all sensible writers, wished to convey to their readers one definite thought in words which they could understand."<sup>7</sup>

This was the chief underlying principle of Calvin's exposition: He was always seeking to discover the "one definite thought" behind what the biblical author wrote. Calvin believed this was the expositor's first duty:

Since it is almost his (the interpreter's) only task to unfold the mind of the writer whom he has undertaken to expound, he misses his mark, or at least strays outside his limits, by the extent to which

he leads his readers away from the meaning of his author. . . . It is . . . presumptuous and almost blasphemous to turn the meaning of Scripture around without due care, as though it were some game that we were playing. And yet many scholars have done this at one time.<sup>8</sup>

Schaff agrees, writing: "Calvin kept constantly in view the primary and fundamental aim of the interpreter, namely, to bring to light the true meaning of the biblical authors according to the laws of thought and speaker. He transferred himself into their mental state and environment so as to become identified with them, and let them explain what they actually did say, and not what they might or should have said."<sup>9</sup> This Calvin did with exceptional skill and precision.

Stressing this same point, David Puckett writes: "Calvin rarely loses sight of the fact that before one can explain how a passage applies to the person of the sixteenth century he must determine what its meaning was for the original writer's contemporaries. This means that Calvin can neither uproot a text from its immediate literary context nor neglect the environment in which the document was originally produced. The exegete may not neglect the audience to whom the writing was originally addressed."<sup>10</sup> He adds, "In larger textual units Calvin almost always favors the interpretation that he believes best suits the context. Any interpretation that cannot be justified contextually is, at best, improbable."<sup>11</sup> And

Parker concludes, "[Calvin] keeps to the historical context in the interpretation and exegesis of passages."<sup>12</sup>

#### ❖ DISTINCTIVE NO. 14: LITERAL INTERPRETATION

In digging into the author's original intent in a passage, Calvin insisted on *sensus literalis*, the literal sense of the biblical text. He rejected the medieval *quadriga*, the ancient interpretation scheme that allowed for literal, moral, allegorical, and analogical meanings of a text. As an expositor, he believed he was not free to play fast and loose with a passage and impose his own meaning on it. As Calvin put it, "The true meaning of Scripture is the natural and obvious meaning."<sup>13</sup>

Without a literal hermeneutic, Calvin believed, all objectivity and certainty would be lost. On one occasion, he wrote, "The legitimate use of Scripture is perverted when it is enunciated in an obscure manner such as no one can understand."<sup>14</sup> In this vein, the Reformer stated, "The important thing is that the Scripture should be understood and explained; how it is explained is secondary."<sup>15</sup>

The literalism of Calvin's interpretation was directly related to the Renaissance scholars' desire to get at "the original and genuine meaning of a text."<sup>16</sup> In keeping with this:

Reformers, like Luther, Bucer, and Zwingli, as well as Calvin, who were all indebted to Erasmus and the humanistic method, agreed that the natural meaning