

# On Writing a Sermon

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My first ordained position was as chaplain to a military academy. The chapel was a large, stone building with slate floors and large stained glass windows, copied in the 1920's from the chapel at the United States Military Academy at West Point. On my first Sunday I climbed up into the pulpit, a carved stone pulpit projecting over a congregation of several hundred teenaged boys with access to weapons. I had paraphrased the morning's gospel reading and made several illustrations when the first wooden kneeler crashed to the slate floor making a noise much like gunfire. "How embarrassing for the cadet" I thought. Then three or four more fell. The message was clear: focus.

At that time I was fortunate to have the friendship and guidance of two mentors, Bishop Stanley Atkins and Professor Reginald Fuller, Englishmen with an extraordinary command of the language, great academic backgrounds and years of experience in the pulpit. Their sermons were clear and to the point, never exceeding ten minutes. Their illustrations were brief, limited to one, reflecting matters of which they could speak with personal experience. Observing and listening to them shaped the way I write a sermon.

In my experience the Old Testament reading, Epistle, and Psalm have usually been selected because they make one point in support of the Gospel; finding that point is first. To do so I find it helpful to read the texts in several English translations but, most important, in the original Greek, noting that Greek words may have several definitions and meanings depending upon context; the definitions may be central to

the point to be made. Multiple points dilute the sermon. I limit my sermons to one point.

I do not repeat or paraphrase the texts in a sermon. The congregation has already heard them. If you find and present the point to be made, the congregation can make the connection with the texts.

One illustration is enough if it truly addresses and speaks to the point. The illustration is from my personal experience, not from other sources. The congregation can tell when what I say does not ring true.

My process in writing a sermon is to first identify the point made by the readings and relate that point to the Gospel and to a common experience, using one illustration. A full sermon may be delivered in ten minutes. It has been said that anything worth saying can be said in ten minutes; the Gospel is well worth saying.