

The Basic Elements of Preaching

*Adapted and Expanded from
“The Elements of Preaching”
by Warren Wiersbe & David Wiersbe*



Prepared
by
Chris Reeves

The Basic Elements of Preaching

Things We Should Do

The Basic Elements of Preaching

1. There are five preaching obligations:

- We must know God's truth ourselves
- We must practice God's truth personally
- We must know the needs of the people we minister to as those needs relate to God's truth
- We must learn how to best communicate God's truth
- We must grow in our knowledge of God's truth

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2. The preacher himself must be prepared, not just his sermon
 - Cultivate your own personal walk with the Lord: prayer, devotional reading, etc.
 - Be prepared physically, mentally, and spiritually

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3. Preaching is an act of worship

- When it is not, then there is a danger of the speaker being elevated over God
- As an act of worship, we will want to give God our best
- As an act of worship, we will honor God, not ourselves (no impressing or entertaining with words or body language)
- A good motto for the pulpit: “Sirs, we would see Jesus”

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4. The sermon must have both content and intent

- The purpose of preaching is not just to discuss a subject, but to achieve a particular object or goal
- A preacher must not simply instruct the mind, but stir the heart and motivate the will to action
- Each lesson must have a specific aim and that aim must be stated clearly to the audience in one sentence (sometimes called “the sermon proposition”)

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4. (cont.) The “sermon proposition” should be...

- biblical
- meeting a specific need
- definite, clear, and brief
- honest and accurate
- interesting enough to hold the attention
- typically stated in the present tense

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5. The sermon should be organized

- God is not the author of confusion, but some preachers are
- Have a definite goal to reach and know how to get there
- Typical organization: introduction, body, and conclusion
- Like a human skeleton, the outline does not have to be seen, but it does have to be there
- Do not force the scriptures into your outline
- Be willing to alter your approach, but remain organized

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6. The sermon should be based upon the primary meaning of the text (essentials), not on the secondary meaning of the translation (accidentals)

- Base your points on the original meaning of the Heb. and Gr. words, not on modern definitions of the English words in your Bible
- Consult the original Heb. and Gr. meanings when possible
- Use a variety of reliable (literal) English translations
- Can I make my point from more than just one reliable translation? If not, I am probably making the wrong point.

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7. Build your outline on the unique features of the text, not on a generic outline model

- Still have an intro., body, and conclusion, but...
- Let each text have its own number of points, approach, etc.
- Preach on different kinds of texts so that your approach will be different each week, keeping you from becoming predictable and boring

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8. Be specific (not generic) and clear (not fuzzy) in your preaching
 - There is power in being specific and precise
 - Be specific in your choice of words: Did you mean ... results or consequences, difficulties or dilemmas, punishment or discipline?
 - Be specific with names, dates, places
 - Be specific with biblical references
 - Be specific in your development & application of the lesson

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9. Don't try to explain the obvious or the unexplainable

- Yes, we want to overcome biblical illiteracy (key items in a text that need to be explained), but...
- Explaining the obvious leads to boredom: explaining such things as eating, walking, speaking, sleeping, etc.
- Explaining the unexplainable leads to frustration and supposition

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10. Preach within the boundaries...

- the boundaries of the truth of God's word
- the boundaries of the attention span of your audience
- the boundaries of the abilities and needs of your audience

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11. Use your preaching time wisely, whether long or short

- What do you do if you have a shorter period of time than what you had planned?
- Get right to the point; remove the low-priority items and focus on the important
- How long does it take to read the Sermon on the Mount? Is there any “filler” or “fluff” in this sermon?

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12. Preach to express, not to impress

- What is important is the content of your message, not your oratory skills, body movements, or PowerPoint slides
- Use simplicity (not complexity) so that your audience can easily get the point and repeat the point to others
- Explain all your terms: theological terms, biblical words, cultural concepts, etc.
- Speak concretely, not abstractly

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13. Dig deep into the text

- Paraphrasing the text is not good preaching; avoid shallow surface, preaching
- Engage in deep exegetical study to bring out all that you can in the text; immerse yourself in the text
- What does the text say: **information**? What does the text mean: **interpretation**? How does this text apply to us: **application**? How can I best present this text: **organization**?

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14. Do your own work and preach your own message

- Your message does not have to be original, but you must have your own understanding of the material
- If you borrow a lesson from someone, don't just "plagiarize" it, make it your own
- Quote, give credit, and document when necessary
- Develop your own preaching style (voice, gestures, movements, etc.), don't mimic another

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15. Strive for variety and balance

- Variety in **type**: textual, expository, topical, themes, books of the Bible, etc.
- Variety in **content** (the whole counsel of God)
- Variety in **opening**: a statement, a command, a question, an encouragement, an exclamation, a definition, an illustration, a reading, etc.
- Variety in **form**: story, argument, etc.
- Variety in **purpose**: inform, warn, answer error, etc.

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16. Plan your preaching

- Plan a balanced spiritual diet for the congregation
- Plan from different parts of the Bible or different doctrines
- Plan based upon times of the year
- Plan based upon the make-up of the congregation

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17. A sermon series must be independent, but related

- Each message should be able to stand alone, but it must also have an element in it that ties it with the others
- Don't spend too much time reviewing the previous lessons in the series and feel free to break up the series periodically
- If you have visitors, do not begin with ... "You will remember last week..."; have a fresh introduction for each lesson
- Don't start a series you cannot, or will not, finish

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18. Preach to individuals

- It is ok to say “you” during the sermon, not just “we”
- Address specific needs of individuals that you know about without calling their names (avoid the generic, the theoretic, the hypothetical, and the esoteric)
- Try to reach all the major groups in your audience

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19. Never separate doctrine, duty, and devotion

- Don't explain a Bible truth (doctrine) without making a personal and practical application
- Don't exhort and encourage Christian duty without basing that duty on sound doctrine
- Move from a doctrinal foundation to a practical application
- Each sermon should aim for the mind (doctrine), the heart (devotion), and the will (duty)

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20. Speak the truth in love

- Your message may be according to the truth of God's word, but what is your attitude or motive while you are presenting it? Love the truth and love the audience.
- It is possible to present a message that is truthful but with anger/bitterness/resentment in your heart
- Truth without love can destroy a person by brutality and not change him at all
- Love without truth can destroy a person by error or change him in the wrong direction

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21. Have faith in preaching

- Be confident - truly believe that you are needed
(Rom. 10:19)
- Be patient - truly believe that your work will bear fruit
(1 Cor. 3:6)
- Be committed - woe is me if I preach not the gospel
(1 Cor. 9:16)

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22. Be creative

- Approach a text from different angles (you are not looking for “new truths” or “hidden meanings”)
- Use different introductions, sermon styles, applications, illustrations, etc.
- You are not looking to be clever or cute, but original
- The media and manufacturers spend millions of dollars on creative products, packaging, and advertising; pay the price to offer a creative sermon that offers the truth

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23. Be balanced

- Balancing “positive” and “negative” messages (the Bible does not in fact use these terms) – 2 Tim. 4:2
- Balancing doctrines: the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27)
- Balance within the sermon itself
- Planning your preaching will help with balance (see #16 in this material)

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24. Preach in the present tense

- We live in the present tense, so what is God saying to me in the present tense
- What timeless truths can I bring forward for today (1 Cor. 10:11; Rom. 15:4)?
- It has been said that 2 Timothy 3:16 can be remembered this way: profitable for doctrine – **what is right**; for reproof – **what is not right**; for correction – **how to get right**; and, for instruction – **how to stay right**

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25. Never be satisfied with your preaching

- Be willing to grow, improve, and learn more regarding the preparation and delivery of your sermons
- Avoid slumping into a ritual or routine of preaching (going through the motions); don't be a preaching machine
- Get out of your comfort zone and try new things as long as Bible truth and the work of the preacher are not compromised

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Things We Should Not Do

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1. Do not waste time on long introductions

- Your introduction should create interest and convince the listener, but move on without being abrupt
- The listener will “tune out” if you spend too much time on the introduction (we live in a world of short attention spans)
- The following can cause the introduction to be too long:
1) general comments not related to the sermon, 2) comments about the sermon, or 3) material that is not Bible related (jokes, etc.)

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2. Do not base sermons on supposition instead of scripture

- People, whether they come with this purpose or not, need to hear truth and proof, not what you think or feel
- Be careful not to start with scripture and then wander off into well-meaning supposition and assumption
- There's a big difference between truth and supposition (Jer. 23:28)

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3. Do not use poor English or bad grammar

- Poor English and bad grammar is distracting
- Speak and write correctly, not the way you hear it or see it
- Is this correct: “God did this for you and I”? (Online grammar websites are helpful.)
- Be careful about using modern slang, jargon, or clichés
- Read books about speaking and writing well
- Check your own pronunciation of words for geographic influence; listen to recordings of your own sermons

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4. Do not “hide behind the pulpit”

- Do not use your message from the pulpit to get back at a church member with whom you are having a problem
- Do not use the pulpit for personal complaints, venting, or hints about this or that
- Remember your basic duty – preach the word (2 Tim. 4:2)
- Remember the rest of your audience that is not the object of your attack; it is not fair to them to hear your attack

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5. Do not preach everything you know on a topic in one lesson
 - Be careful about information overload
 - Break up your material into digestible amounts and put it into two parts, or a series of sermons, if necessary
 - The deeper you go into a verse, a word, etc., the more you have to explain what you are saying
 - You will lose part of your audience when you preach too much, too deep, or too long

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6. Do not use illustrations carelessly

- Use an illustration to make a point clearer or to apply a point; use them the way Jesus and others did in the Bible
- Make sure the illustration is pertinent to the point and accurate in its telling
- Try to use illustrations from your own life instead of canned book illustrations for preachers
- Do not use an illustration just for an effect or to get a laugh
- Do not base your sermon on an illustration, but on scripture

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7. Do not overpower the audience with your vocabulary

- Preach to express (to be understood), not to impress
- Take the time to explain any special words or terms you are using (hermeneutics, apocalyptic, sectarian, etc.)
- Use Greek and Hebrew word definitions carefully
- Preaching is not to show off your learning; when you work to build up your ego, you tear down your sermon's effectiveness

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8. Do not deliver your message carelessly

- Your message is like the arrowhead on the front of an arrow; your delivery is like the feathers on the back of the arrow – it gets the message to its target
- Study, as you have time, basic public speaking principles; there is always room for improvement
- Do not use a “pulpit style” that is different from your normal conversation style; be yourself; don’t imitate others
- Preach to people; look right at them, not the back wall

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9. Do not conclude your sermon with vague generalities

- Know what you are aiming at before you start and conclude with specific points that match the aim your lesson
- Prepare (at least mentally) the conclusion of your sermon first
- Your sermon is not simply to explain a generic subject, but to achieve a specific object, aim, or goal
- A vague proposition (see #4 above), leads to a vague conclusion, which leads to a vague response and vague blessings

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10. Do not move rapidly from verse-to-verse without explanation

- How many verses you use in a sermon is a matter of judgment, but consider that it is better to use fewer verses with explanation to establish a point, than a greater number without explanation

- Give the audience time to find the references and read them with you (references printed out on the PPT, or not, is a matter of judgement); give time for the reference to “sink in” before going to the next reference (the audience did not spend the same amount of time that you did during the week studying the references)

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11. Do not preach from different Bible translations every week
 - New Bible translations are constantly being printed; decide on one translation and stick with it – one that falls within the “literal” spectrum of translations (KJV, NKJV, ASV, NASV, ESV)
 - Our audiences no longer use a uniform translation and the preacher constantly switching translations makes Bible reading (and meaning) even more challenging

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12. Do not betray confidences in your preaching

- Do not share private matters publicly (like from private counselling sessions, matters told in confidence, matters told to you by other preachers)
- Be careful about using examples from your marriage or family; you can embarrass them without thinking
- If you want the members to trust you, keep confidential matters confidential

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13. Do not abuse humor in the pulpit

- Remember that preaching is serious business and our time is precious
- A brief moment of wit or subtle humor can be used to illustrate a specific point; natural humor is best, not canned
- But humor used just for humor sake takes away from the scripture
- It would not be good to joke about serious things like sin, hurt (divorce, etc.), unfaithfulness, death, or eternity

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14. Do not preach yourself, preach the word

- Preach Jesus, not yourself (2 Cor. 4:5; 1 Thess. 2:5-6)
- You preach yourself when you say and do things to attract attention to yourself alone
- You can say things about yourself both positive and negative (like Paul did), but only to illustrate a truth that points to Jesus

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15. Do not wait until the end of the work to prepare your sermons

- Preparing your sermon early in the week gives you more time to add or take away thoughts
- Preparing your sermon early in the week allows you time to deal with other matters that come up at the end of the week
- You can “throw together” a sermon late in the week, but it will probably lack the depth of a well-prepared sermon
- Prepare early in the week, but be flexible to change it if necessary to address a particular need that comes up

Bibliography

Wiersbe, Warren and David Wiersbe. *The Basic Elements of Preaching*.