

Homiletical Hack Make Moves, Not Points

Those of us committed to expository preaching have been helped by the **developmental questions** proposed by Haddon Robinson in his standard textbook on homiletics. The answers to these questions enhance clarity and relevance of a scriptural text for a contemporary audience. In short, they help transition the sermon from a history lesson into a transformational encounter.

Through our utter dependence on the Holy Spirit, of course.

The developmental questions proposed in “Biblical Preaching” are these:

1. What does it mean?
2. Do they “buy” it?
3. So what?

What does it mean?

A sermon hearer may be able to parrot back what you said, but that’s not necessarily the same as knowing what you meant.

If you said, “We are meant to lose our life in order to find it.”

The hearer may think you’re kidding or crazy. Dead is not life. Losing our life does not yield a positive outcome and doesn’t compute to finding it.

However, when it is explained that the word “life” in the original language is the word related to psyche and relates to the realm of the soul instead of physical death, then the hearer is able to grasp that what is meant is “we willing to choose to lay down our self-life in order to find a meaningful life.”

Do we “buy” it?

Are we persuaded as to the assertion's validity? If the preacher suggests that "we can all participate in seeing acts that can only be done in Jesus name, as found in Acts 4, the hearer may wonder if seeing a person walk who was previously lame may think, "I don't believe it. Miracles don't happen, at least not in this age. Those kinds of "in Jesus" moments aren't valid. I don't buy it.

It's not until the preacher invites the hearers to try God in smaller faith steps will the hearer consider that smaller acts of faith will build our faith that may lead to more demonstrative faith acts. This move

So what?

How does it apply to my life? What does it look like in real life? What kind of world would we have if we did what the text is proposing?

Why should I care?

A "less assumptive" approach sensitive to the pace of life and the distractions of contemporary sermon hearers demands we add an additional developmental question to our sermon preparation arsenal.

These four questions can provide a template for the sermon outline and a memorable way to present the message in a less assumptive form.

David Buttrick in his thorough and often overwhelming academic resource about homiletics strongly proposes our we think in terms of **moves**. The nuancing is subtle but significant.

Historically, preaching was often thought of as making points. The emphasis was on oratory.

While Buttrick's theology is cringe-worthy for evangelical methodology, his cultural analysis of contemporary sermon hearers is noteworthy. A more conversational tone is needed. Thinking in

moves instead of biblical preaching's model of introduction, body, and conclusion yields positive results for the preacher willing to implement the "spoils" of the new homiletic academy.

(For the rest of us, the preceding was an inside argument with those inside the evangelical homiletic conversation. If you didn't get it, no worries. Keep reading.)

With that said, let's get to the four moves and the specific developmental question that they answer.

Move 1- "A reason we ought to care about the text we will be looking at today is..." Most expository sermons fail to connect the relevance of the sermon until late in the sermon's development.

The introduction is usually an illustration of the pericope's topic, but not "applicable" to the hearer's experiences.

"For example," the preacher begins, "Our walk through I Corinthians has brought us to the last half of chapter 16 where we will discover Paul's vision for what a healthier/restored church will look like. Paul has been dealing with the problems that have been plaguing this church in Corinth and the destructive forces that they need to remedy."

"Speaking of destructive forces," the preacher now illustrates, "A bird watching friend of mine told me recently about "cowbirds. I didn't know such a thing existed. Did you? Apparently, cowbirds wait until the other birds build their nests and then take their eggs and deposit them among the other eggs banking on the motherly instincts of that bird to raise their young for them. They may even stick around to watch. If the host bird removes the eggs from the nest, the cowbird may even come back and destroy the host bird's eggs to dissuade further removals."

"Now that's just mafia behavior in the bird world," the pastor continues. "And, Paul has been addressing the mafia behavior manifesting itself in the early church that we've been reading

about in the previous fifteen chapters. Today we'll read about his desire for a restored church after having navigated the ravages of the first century 'cowbirds' among them. Let's now turn in our Bibles together to I Corinthians 16: 12 and begin reading..."

The communicator has illustrated that day's topic, but not applied it to our lives.

S/he has not answered the relevance question...

What is at risk if we fail to listen? What does it matter if we get what's being proposed for the next thirty minutes or so?

This preacher is assuming that the subject of an unhealthy church matters to the hearers. And in some ideal world, they do. In theory, yes.

But at 11:15 on a Sunday morning after the week we've had at work, the mower running out of gas halfway through, the conflict had with the daughter over curfew, and the excitement about the Cowboys game later this afternoon... it's a lot to ask the hearers to make the connections for themselves.

Instead, sermon hearers need an introduction that makes the "what is at risk if we don't get done in our world what the biblical author is wanting done in his world" clear.

Crystal.

Now don't misunderstand. Illustrating the text's topic is needed. But, connecting the dots to real life and how the topic being considered matters must not be assumed.

The application of the text's assertion will come later in the sermon, but the subject's relevance is needed earlier in the sermon than most homileticians think.

"Grab 'em by the throat," right from the start. It matters that congregants hear the word of the Lord on the topic the preacher is communicating in the first move.

I like to tell my students that when you say to people turn in your Bibles to I Corinthians 16 and assume that they care about whatever it is that text cares about...

They don't.

And the reason I know they don't is because I don't. I'm a trained professional. A theologian by vocation. I'm even paid to care. But, I don't.

Not after the week I've had. Because it's been a "hooley" of a week. Getting to church today wasn't easy.

I need some warmup. Some orientation that moves beyond illustrating this text's subject into showing me what listening this Sunday will matter to my Monday.

Move 2- What is the assertion on the subject raised that this particular text is making? What are saying about what we are talking about today?

Let's be clear at this point...

To be considered a biblical sermon the "what we are saying about what we are talking about" must necessarily be the same thing the biblical author is doing with what he is saying about what he is talking about.

We can't have Isaiah listening in and saying, "Did I say that?"

We don't want Dr. Luke sitting in the back of the auditorium thinking, "What?! That's not what I meant."

Instead, we want to imagine them saying, "If I had been speaking to this contemporary audience what I'm hearing accurately represents the priorities, precepts, and practices for the kind of world our God wants created.

This move is what we know as "the big idea" of the sermon. The one thing that we want the hearer to walk away with after the message. If they are asked at lunch, "So what was the sermon

today about anyway?” It is the thing that is answered. The thing that is remembered. Therefore, we want to make it as memorable as possible. Pithy. Pop.

In this second move we bring our edited content of all that we have observed, interpreted, and believe relevant for our hearers. It is a precept that ought to be embraced. Or a priority that has been neglected. Or a practice that deserves attention. Or some combination of the above.

It is the “move” that explains the context surrounding the text the preacher is teaching, It describes the cultural implications that influence the ways contemporary hearers may scratch their heads thinking...

“What is going on here?”

Until the original audience’s worldview is explained the listener is left with little more than, “You’ve got to be kidding me! Why would God do that? How barbaric. That’ll never work!” and other similar sentiments.

This move makes the statement that expresses the heart of God in today’s world that is the same as the biblical author wanted expressed regarding the heart of God in their day. Then that statement is explained, illustrated, and defended for validity.

The third move is the “prove” move. “We’re hearing what you’re sayin’ Preach. We just ain’t buyin’ it. Doesn’t compute in our world. Not livin’ in reality. Maybe in an ideal world. But not mine. But keep talking, I have a general sentiment that it’s a good idea. Good for you. Good sermon. I’m just not doin’ it. No way!”

When preachers use their available time preparing the truth of what is being proposed without giving attention to the barriers as to why those listening find it unconvincing are at risk of sounding smart but not being helpful.

The goal of biblical preaching is transformation with application not merely information alone.

Move 3 is the pivotal persuasion move. It is anticipating the arguments of the sermon hearers, then leading them into the reasonableness of the proposition both below and above the line.

By below the line is meant arguing through natural revelation where we see this in other places.

Sometimes the argument made is one that points out how ingrained perspectives may be culturally conditioned. But making an argument through a word picture or analogy from another place it shows up in real life can arrest presuppositions and lower the hearer's conscious or unconscious resistance.

Above the line reasoning is explaining the assertion from a special revelation perspective. There is still a mystery. The limits of reason are acknowledged, but the possible sense of how the universe might be a better place to live if we accepted the proposed assertion is attempted.

At the very least, at least the preacher is giving a nod to how this sounds to culturally aware congregants. Rather than communicating, "The rest of the world is looking out for themselves, but we will be better off if we carry a cross, so what's your problem?" Or, "he died, was buried, and rose again the third day. What's your problem?" Instead, an empathetic, "This is a hard saying, isn't it," helps the listener know that the preacher can empathize with the implications of the Bible's ethic.

As a preacher develops proficiency with the four moves model, it is hoped that they are able to create a meld between moves two and three. To say it differently, the assertion, the barriers, the reading of the text, and the cultural explanations are puzzle pieces in the preacher's arsenal expressed in the sermon's delivery in a way appropriate to the subject matter and the audience addressed.

The final move of the sermon proposes practical next steps the sermon hearer are invited to consider that are examples of the implications of this text on everyday life. It is the application of the assertion.

That's an important distinction to make because at the heart of the move model presumes that all sermons are application sermons. They are in some sense all topical. We are not sharing information. We are not intending a lesson in history. We are preaching for life change. Practices supported by truth taught in love led by the Spirit is the preacher's aim.

This move says, "As a result of what we've acknowledged today, here are some things that the Holy Spirit may be inviting you to consider implementing into your life." We do not know with every subject how the Lord may be progressively leading each person to apply the text. There are issues on which Christians disagree. The biblical preacher navigates a balance between being as specific as possible and trusting the union with Christ that the believing congregant has alive and at work within them. More on this in the chapter "this and that" with suggested words that the grace-oriented preacher can use and others they will want to avoid.

Granted, there is mostly application that is incumbent upon every believer. For example, the admonition to "avoid sexual immorality" assumes the application that people committed to the way of Jesus will limit their sexual practice to the covenant of marriage. Yet, the preacher committed to faithful shepherding can speak to the pitfalls of pornography, business travel boundaries, or parenting resources for their children's sex education.

Now that we've worked through the four basic moves and their content, let's do a quick review of what's been said:

Move 1: Risk- What is at risk if the sermon hearers fail to hear the assertion proposed by the subject of this sermon's text?

Move 2: Text- What is the assertion that this text is making about the subject of this sermon?

Move 3: Barriers- What barrier(s) might hinder the sermon hearers from believing and doing what this sermon is proposing?

Move 4: Apply- What next step(s) will the sermon hearers take as a result of hearing this sermon? What will they do with what the preacher is saying given what the author was doing with what he was saying?

These four moves are very similar to a popular Christian education resource of yesteryear, Larry Richard in his resource for Sunday School teacher's a generation ago titled, "Creative Bible Teaching." His memorable four words describing the four elements of a lesson were, "HOOK, BOOK, LOOK, TOOK."

These moves are not meant to be exhaustive. The template is not meant to be cumbersome or legalistic. As the rest of us increase our competency through practice and evaluation, will simply make "moves" somewhat oblivious to the formula just described. Perhaps three moves make the sermon, or five, or more. The maturing homiletician will use the developmental questions as a "second nature" filter when communicating the sermon.

There's no advantage to preaching your exegetical outline. We're not teaching if the hearers are not learning. We need to make the "move" to preaching homiletically. The "four move template" doesn't change the content, but it will enhance the clarity and relevance for the congregation. It will help guard them from pesky cowbirds hoping to undermine congregants from hearing and applying our sermons.

Further Resources:

Robinson, Haddon W. *Biblical Preaching*, 2^d edition. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001.

Buttrick, David. *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.

Richards, Lawrence O. *Creative Bible Teaching*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1998.

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