

## Getting it Clear

### **Key objectives:**

- To value clarity over rhetoric
- To see that it is loving as well as effective communication to work hard at clarity, structure and [saying One Thing](#)
- To move towards Word-driven rather than anecdote-driven preaching
- To see the importance of avoiding jargon and of thinking about how words will be heard

Group study: Colossians 4:2-4

- What do you find most striking here?
- What is the content of Paul's preaching and his chief desire as he preaches?
- Plenary drawing in contributions that will hopefully include:
  - Paul the great apostle needs prayer
  - There needs to be a door opened that only God can open
  - He is declaring the mystery of Christ (cf. Col. 1:27; 2:2-3) – i.e. the revealed mystery of the gospel of Christ crucified (cf. Col. 1:21-23)
  - Paul is suffering for the gospel
  - He is not asking for prayer to be released from prison – he wants to have opportunities there, he's just concerned about the spread of the gospel (cf. Phil. 1:12-18)
  - His main desire for his preaching, as well as for an open door, is that it would be clear

There are two parts to the process of preaching – (1) getting it right and (2) getting it across. We've spent a lot of time on number 1 because that is absolutely key. If you don't spend hours and hours wrestling with the text, reading, reading, praying, getting to the heart of the story, then you don't have anything to say.

But the other half of the task is also very important and that's what we're moving onto now – getting it across. How do we communicate the message of the text as effectively as possible?

And the first thing that needs to be said is that communication must be in the context of love:

1. A ministry of love – Colossians 1:24-2:5

Paul is suffering for these Colossians – and he's glad to! (1:24)

He struggles for them even though he's never even seen them (2:1)

He rejoices that they are standing firm in the faith (2:5)

In other letters he says:

“I yearn for you with all the affection of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:8)

“we were like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but our own selves, because you had become very dear to us” (1 Thess. 2:7-9)

Paul is not communicating to make himself look good or clever or to please people – he communicates out of love.

How will love shape the way we communicate? [you can get people to contribute suggestions here]

- We'll be praying for people as we prepare and as we come to speak, that the Word would come home to them.
- We'll put good time into preparation – wrestling with the text – that is loving – people might not see it or notice it or congratulate us – but that it loving.
- We'll love people enough to say the hard things. We're not using them to pump our egos. We are free from needing their approval. We can genuinely love them by bringing them the Word.
- We'll think about how to communicate in a way that they can receive. Not just talk to get things out of our head but to get them into someone else's. Accommodating language, style, vocabulary. Communication is like passing a ball in football or rugby – I want to give a sympathetic pass that is easy to receive.
- We'll speak patiently and gently (2 Tim. 4:2; 1 Thess. 2:7).
- We'll work really hard at being clear:

## 2. Struggling to be clear

- a) Style - Be as plain as possible - Not about flair or oratory – be happy to be thought 'simple' or 'unsophisticated' or even rude so long as you are making the Scriptures as plain and clear (and often blunt and gritty) as they are
- b) Vocabulary – get rid of all churchy jargon and cliché
- c) Avoiding misunderstanding

**“The gospel heard is different from the Gospel preached”**, said Walter Freytag.  
How do our listeners understand key terms such as God, Spirit, Sin, Grace, Redemption etc. E.g. The blood of Jesus Christ (Have you stopped to consider the popular prayer of covering food, persons and property with the blood of Christ?)  
As we preach and teach, we must keep asking ourselves how the Christian key words and phrases are understood by our African listeners. We should bring into confrontation the authentic Biblical meaning and the possible local re-interpretation. This will help our listeners filter out pagan and animistic concepts which many Africans sitting in our pews still hold very firmly.  
(Steven Musa-Kormayea)

This might mean we have to say what we don't mean.

- d) Illustrations
  - In a narrative you will hardly need them – just bring out the tension and drama of the story itself. Retelling it in the present tense and with some more updated language can help it to live.

- If you do need to illustrate then save it for the main points and particularly the difficult points to grasp – don't just illustrate because you can
- Do them at end of preparation process
- Clear, short, everyday (e.g. from the market or matatu of family life, not from contexts far away or long ago that will take ages to explain), vivid
- Visual aids – for children's talks this can be helpful but be very careful:
  - We need to fight against our visual age which assumes that the visual is more powerful (and more entertaining) than the spoken/written word.
  - Biblical religion has always challenged the prevailing visual culture of idolatry and gives us a God revealed through words (e.g. Deut. 4:15-24; John 1).
  - Yes God did use visual things to teach of Christ (e.g. the snake on the pole) but the danger (and often reality) was the worship of those physical signs.
  - The real blessedness is for those who have not seen and yet believe on the basis of the written word (John 20:29-31).
  - In fact word pictures are more powerful than visual images which fail to deliver the full glory and reality of spiritual things (cf. the attempt to draw pictures of the things in the book of Revelation).
- e) Cross-references – use very sparingly indeed it at all – use a) if the NT quotes the OT; b) if you really needed to show the background (e.g. Gen. 3:15 as a background to Joshua 10:24); or c) if you need to show the NT fulfilment of the OT (e.g. Col. 2:15 as the fulfilment of Gen. 3:15 etc.) – be very careful as very easily we start moving away from our focus on the main passage and introducing other thoughts – just use when really necessary to illuminate the main text.
- f) Personal testimony, anecdotes and stories
  - Sparingly – we want to hear the story of the text not our stories
  - Not as distractions that take us away from the text but for illumination
  - If personal they should show weakness not strength (2 Cor. 11:30)
  - It is not about us (John 3:30)
- g) Quotations from other authors – v. sparingly – our authority is the Word not the commentator or scholar, we mustn't teach like scribes and Pharisees. Leave most of your preparation and workings on the desk.
- h) Using Greek and Hebrew words – don't do it! Don't want to take Bible out of hands of the believer in the pew.

### 3. The value of structure

- a) Of the whole talk – we don't want to be prescriptive or restrictive here – it doesn't have to be three points – it doesn't even need to be points but there must be some kind of clear road map, some sort of route through with some kind of signposting for the listener so they know where they are. Without a structure it just becomes a ramble or a rant. (Or as a body without a skeleton it becomes a jellyfish.)  
The Bible uses structure (e.g. repeated phrases or groups of three or seven or ten or 'bookends' or mirror/chiasm structures) because it was written in an oral culture and that helps the listeners to follow and remember.  
Ways to get a structure:

- Follow the structure of the passage – this is often the best thing to do – with a narrative there'll often be a natural division of the 'scenes' in the text. You can go back to that step of dividing the passage into these scenes (Session 6 point 5) and make these your sections or points.
- Break down the Big Idea or Theme or Aim sentence into its logical steps. E.g. If my big idea for 2 Kings 5 was "The broadness, narrowness and freeness of the grace of God" then it would make sense to look at each of the three elements in turn – they might roughly occur in that order in the text but they would overlap a good deal.
- Do two or three 'runs' through the text. Sometimes with a story (or a Psalm) it might be best to go through the whole thing at different levels. E.g. 1st run through just getting an idea of what happened at the time, feeling the action and the tension. 2nd run through seeing what this would have meant for the people of Judah looking back on it in years to come. 3rd run through seeing how it is fulfilled in Jesus and what it means therefore for us.

The key thing, whatever structure you go for, is that you have one and that you are clear how each point or section within that structure contributes to the whole. You want all your guns pointed at the main target. If a point doesn't really contribute to the big point then either you've got the big idea wrong or it's a side point you can just drop it.



#### b) Within each part

Sometimes the problem is that we have an overall structure (4 points or whatever) but we don't think about what we will say *within* each of those sections – we just think, "I'll say something about the broadness of God's love, then something about the narrowness, then say a bit about the freeness of grace." And the danger is that we ramble *within* each section and don't make the points clearly.

One method many people have found helpful is something like this:

- STATE – POINT – EXPLAIN – GROUND (SPEG)
- STATE: Say what the point is – a clear, brief, memorable, accurate phrase
- POINT: Show us where exactly in the text you are getting these things from (like Paul in Acts 17: "reasoning from the Scriptures")
- EXPLAIN: Make it clear, using illustrations and cross-references if necessary
- GROUND: Bring it home, apply the point, show how this aspect of the gospel makes a difference to how we think, feel and live
- And then move on to the next point

#### 4. Preaching One Thing

- Sharpen the stick

To stick a broom handle in the ground is very difficult unless you whittle it to a very sharp point.

It is very powerful to communicate one thing (the big message the passage is giving you) clearly.

Be ruthless with material, get it very clear.

Mike Bullmore: "the sermon is not a container to contain everything you have discovered about the text."

But don't lose the details – that's what gives it the cutting edge

- Keep it together
  - Perhaps have a 'running illustration' through the talk (though be careful that this doesn't control the text)
  - Keep bringing us back to the main point – keep banging the drum of the Big Idea throughout your talk – at the end of each section you can show how it is bringing out the big thing

Above all we want to be **clear**, in fact so clear that people go away thinking – that was obvious – I could have found that myself.

Group discussion:

- Which of these issues of clarity do we find most ignored in our context?
- How do these things challenge our personal preaching attitudes, preparation and delivery?