Structure and rhetoric

How to Listen to a Sermon

Because preaching involves communicating the Gospel, a preacher's work necessarily involves putting ideas together in a useful package. In writing and communication, that's called structure and rhetoric. When we think about a sermon's structure and rhetoric, we don't have to make it complicated. We use rhetoric every time we define things or communicate ideas or convince another person about something. We do rhetoric naturally and rarely think much about it.

You don't need to be a scholar who knows the difference between instrumental and productive definition or be familiar with the Greek philosopher Aristotle. You don't even need to know the difference between adverbs and prepositions or between nouns and pronouns. All you need to do is think about how your preacher presented the ideas in the sermon and whether it made sense to you.

Naturally, a sermon ought to have something important to say about Scripture and about Jesus. But we'll consider those things elsewhere. Apart from a sermon's theology and biblical content, a sermon is a kind of speech event. And on that count, it's like any other presentation you've encountered. If you've ever watched a video of a TEDTalk, you've seen people use rhetoric well. Those kinds of talks might make you go "Hmmm!", but they rarely make you go "Huh?" That's because they're well organized. The presenters have thought things through. And they've set clear goals about what they want to communicate.

This sort of speech event doesn't happen only in public speaking; it also happens in less public conversations. Let's pretend you're sixteen and think tattoos are cool. But legally you have to be older to get a tattoo and need a parent's permission. If you're going to convince them to sign on the dotted line, you're going to have to make your case. Nobody would need to teach you to make an argument like that. You'd already know you have to pull together your evidence. You'd have to know the pros and cons. And you'd really need to know what line of reasoning works with your parents. You'd have to address what a tattoo costs and who'd pay for it. Or whether they'd think your hoped-for ink is tasteful. Or whether they have a moral stance on permanent body modification.

All those same considerations apply to preaching. When you experience a sermon, you ought to have an idea of the various pieces your preacher has assembled and put before you. You should have a sense of whether the sermon hung together. A good sermon will make you feel something, but we can go beyond how the sermon *felt*. There are things to look for in a sermon.

Begin by asking yourself if your preacher started well. Did they catch your attention? Was it clear that what you were about to hear was worth spending time and energy on? At the very least, was it interesting? Sometimes a preacher has something important to say, but they start with all kinds of other things before they get to it. A strong start means giving you something that matters. It could be something interesting or challenging in a biblical passage or something significant that's happening for your congregation. If your preacher starts with a joke or a clever anecdote, the connection to the main idea needs to be clear. And if they start with a compelling personal story, listen carefully for whether they shift from talking about themselves to proclaiming *God's* word to you.

Once things get started, pay attention to individual elements your preacher uses in the sermon: things like Bible stories, illustrations from books or movies, examples from life experience, and defining theological terms. Is there a clear reason for including them? Or are they there for entertainment value? Do the elements connect to one another or build toward something? Are these things appropriate for this audience?

If the sermon's opening is one bookend, the other is its conclusion. Did your preacher start well and finish strong? Sometimes a preacher can get stuck for how to wrap things up, and things kind dwindle away, without anything memorable that sets things in your mind. But if your preacher has found a way to pull everything together in succinct way, they'll have tied it all with a bow you'll want to keep.

A final way to think about a sermon's structure and rhetoric is to see if you can identify a thread that runs through it. It could be an idea that the preacher keeps coming back to. It could be a turn of phrase that's repeated. It could be thematic. When your preacher comes to the biblical material they'll be preaching on, they have to dive into it and come out with a Word that God is speaking there. The most difficult part of writing a sermon can be finding a rhetorical hook — that *one* thing that holds it all together and also grabs you as the hearer.

All these things together — when they're done well — can make somebody a compelling communicator. But if good communication is all you get, you don't yet have a preacher. There's a missing element that public proclaimers of the Gospel are called to deliver. But we'll have to take that up in the video about theology. There's where you'll get the crux of the matter that turns good communication into God speaking to you.