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# "Are we There Yet?" What Air Travel Teaches Us about Sermon Appeals

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# “Are we there yet?”

## *What air travel teaches us about sermon appeals*

**W**e expect a quick flight from Chicago to South Bend of only twenty-three minutes. We will have you there shortly.” The first officer spoke those words that I had been waiting to hear. I settled into my window seat, buckled my safety belt, and texted my wife that everything was running on schedule and that I would meet her at the luggage carousel.

Soon thereafter, the small jet roared down the runway before quickly ascending over the beautiful downtown skyline, reaching its cruising altitude over Lake Michigan, descending over the eastern shore of that Great Lake, landing on one of the two runways at the small South Bend airport, and parking at the gate. My excitement was peaking because, although it had only been a short trip to Texas to visit my parents, I would soon be greeted by my wife and be driven home.

Sitting near the front of the plane, I quickly unfastened my safety belt, grabbed my backpack, and waited for the flight attendant to give my fellow passengers and me permission to deplane. And that was when the frustration settled in. Tired of standing, I sat down and waited—and waited. There was a mechanical malfunction with the jet bridge, and a call was issued

for a mechanic to come to determine what was causing the malfunction and repair it.

Sitting at the gate, so close to deplaning, seeing my wife, going home. But I could not.

### **The travel experience in homiletic terms**

Preaching a sermon resembles air travel in several ways, with each element of the flying experience finding a counterpart in the sermon—from arriving at the airport for the flight to departing the last airport after finally arriving.

At the conclusion of a recent overseas teaching assignment, my host dropped me off at the airport, at which time I had to fend for myself in terms of navigating the bustling concourse. I stood in front of a huge electronic display, attempting to determine where I needed to go to check in for my flight. That information paved the way for me to take the initial steps in my journey home.

For some, the title of the sermon serves that same function.<sup>1</sup> It provides the initial direction that guides the Holy Spirit-led speaker in the direction that the speaker wishes the listeners to go.

Passengers eventually board the plane and settle in, after which the aircraft taxis to the runway, takes off, and ascends to its cruising altitude. The

sermon introduction serves a similar function in that no airplane pulls away from the gate and instantaneously reaches cruising altitude. The climb must be gradual to be smooth—leading to the main part of the flight that carries the passengers from point A to point B. So, also, with the sermon introduction, in that it should be measured and well-executed, leading to what is considered the main part of the presentation—the body.

The body of the sermon can be likened to the portion of the flight that takes place at cruising altitude, in that it is the part that receives the most focus. As in long-haul flights, passengers expend most of their energies during this portion of the flight (eating, reading, sleeping, entertaining themselves), so also do preachers traditionally spend the bulk of their time studying and preparing for this portion of the sermon. The logic that drives such efforts centers on the notion that information dissemination equates to capable homiletics. However, the body of the sermon must be seen as one of several pieces of the homiletical puzzle.

### **Are we almost there yet?**

Long before a crew member announces the descent of the aircraft,

frequent flyers intuitively recognize the clues that final approach is a pending reality. Especially if it is a cross-country or international flight, they know how much time they have before they have to put away their laptop or use the lavatory one last time. Descent provides time to prepare for a successful landing.

The conclusion of a sermon approximates the gradual descent of an aircraft and a smooth landing. The bulk of the

The actual time in the air is much less than that. Having said that, the journey lasted much longer than that; for he, my wife, and I had to get up, get dressed, and drive two hours to Chicago to take him to the airport. Then he had to check in, clear security, wait to board, travel, land, wait for his friend to pick him up from the airport, and then ride 40 minutes to the friend's house. A two-hour flight turned out to be a seven- or eight-hour event.

*A preferable approach would be to engage the listeners in a series of questions that cause them to look introspectively at where they are and where they need to go.*

journey is now behind the passengers and crew—it is time to touch terra firma once again. As the ascent was gradual and graceful, so also must be the descent and landing. Anything otherwise proves unsettling. Passengers often save their greatest compliments for pilots who execute smooth landings.

Those who sit and listen to our sermons do not expect or anticipate that the sermon will experience a “hard landing.” They want to sense that we as preachers know when the time has come to gracefully reduce the “altitude” and successfully “land.” Even if the sermon has proved to border on the disastrous, no one wants a hard landing. Congregants still want some form of notification that your sermonic “flight” will soon conclude.

### **The most important element of the sermonic “flight”**

My son recently returned to Baltimore after spending a week with his mother and me. The flight was listed as being one hour and 45 minutes long, although that period reflects the length of time from when the plane departs the gate to when it reaches the arrival gate.

The journey did not end until he reached his final destination.

Sermon delivery functions the same way in that the sermon does not end until the “passengers” are able to access their final destination. When landing an airplane, it is not good enough to approach the runway—or even touch down and roll onto the tarmac. The captain has to bring the aircraft all the way to the gate and park. More than that, the jetway operator has to extend the walkway to the plane's door so that the passengers can proceed to their destination. If the passengers do not have the opportunity to reach their final destination, the flight crews, whether on the plane or on the ground, failed to perform.

In the same manner, if the congregation does not have an opportunity to make a decision as a result of the sermon, the preacher has failed in what he attempted to preach. No one should think to end a sermon without making an appeal any more than pilots would think to end a flight without delivering his or her passengers to their final destination; that is, their job is to get them into the airport terminal, so they can go to their house, hotel, business meeting, or vacation spot.

### **The art of the appeal**

One of the biggest challenges that both experienced and beginning preachers alike face is crafting and delivering effective appeals. Many reasons exist as to why preachers struggle with this fifth and final part of the sermon. Some speakers lack confidence in their ability to persuade,<sup>2</sup> or they lack confidence in their preparation. Others fear rejection—that no one will respond—and embarrassment, taking the rejection as a personal affront; or they believe asking people to make a decision amounts to intruding into one's personal space.

Preachers, however, have permission to intrude into the personal space of the listener, as such permission is inherent in the call to occupy the pulpit and in the listener's choice to occupy the pew. Our approach to the hearts of the listeners should be direct, targeted, and undeniable. Haddon Robinson writes, “Like an able lawyer, a minister asks for a verdict. Your congregation should see your idea entire and complete, and they should know and feel what God's truth demands of them.”<sup>3</sup> This approach calls for three components in each appeal: reflection, decision, and action.

*Reflection.* Reflection involves critical listening, which, in turn, involves interpreting the message, judging its strengths and weaknesses, and assigning value to it.<sup>4</sup> Assigning value during the process of an appeal calls for listeners to ask themselves, “What has this sermon said to me?” “Why should this sermon matter to me?” “What should I do as a result of hearing the preacher today?” Reflection demands that the listeners interact with the preacher and his or her questions, as well as interact with the Holy Spirit who, during the sermon, spoke differently to each person sitting in the congregation.

The approach of the preacher is critical in this process. Many preachers take it upon themselves throughout their appeals to instruct the congregation as to what they should think and how they should respond. Such an approach inhibits the listeners' ability to reflect upon precisely how the Holy Spirit wishes for them to respond. A

preferable approach would be to engage the listeners in a series of questions that cause them to look introspectively at where they are and where they need to go. Such an approach creates the environment for each person to arrive at the destination the Holy Spirit designates each of them to reach.

**Decision.** When listeners reflect and ask themselves what they should do as a result of the queries placed before them during the initial portion of the appeal, this reflection demands that the listeners take the next step. That step is based upon the nature of the sermon.

For example, if the sermon is evangelistic in its intent, about mission and outreach, the person may reflect upon his or her lack of reaching out to others and then decide, “I will commit to being used by God to share my faith.” If it is horizontal in its intent, about impacting the community for its betterment, the person may reflect upon his or her sheltered existence and then decide, “I’m going to learn more about the needs of my community.” If the sermon is vertical in its intent, about a closer walk with God, the person may decide that he or she is going to give God permission to renew and restore him or her. Each person arrives at their decision based upon where they are in their journey.

**Action.** Each of these three stages is important. However, if an action plan is not established, then the pathos of the moment is lost as soon as the benediction is pronounced and the congregation starts meeting and greeting in the sanctuary, foyer, or parking lot. The preacher must create a climate during the appeal in which the expectation exists that the listeners must do something concrete about what they have reflected upon and decided. Any approach that falls short effectively displays approval for a *logos* (informational) approach, settling for a dynamic sermon with mental enrichment and cognitive stimulation—but lacking the result of a *pathos* (transformational) approach that reveals itself in a Spirit-filled, renewed lifestyle.

In other words, while the preacher does well to incorporate the components of reflection, decision, and action in the appeal, omitting even one of these proves akin to landing an aircraft and taxiing to the gate—but not opening the door to the jetway so that the passengers can exit and transit to their appointed destinations. Just as each passenger determines how they are getting to their next destination, so also must people in the congregations create a plan that determines how they arrive at the place where the Holy Spirit wishes them to be.

## Peter: A congregation of one

Consider the case of Peter: a one-person congregation to whom Jesus made a sermonic appeal! True to Christ’s prediction (Luke 22:34), Peter denied any knowledge of Jesus on three occasions, all in quick succession. Then came Peter’s life-changing moment (v. 61). When Luke spoke of Jesus’ looking at Peter, the Greek of the passage indicates a targeted, direct gaze, not a casual glance. Without saying a word, Jesus made a sermonic appeal to Peter.

Peter then engaged with the three components of an effective appeal. He reflected upon his brash promise of unswerving fidelity to Christ (v. 33). Recognizing that he failed miserably, he then decided how he would respond to Christ’s intent look into his soul, and he experienced the heartbreak of breaking the heart of his Rabbi.

Reflection and decision, however, were not enough; for a moment of regret and disappointment can easily fade into recalcitrance and defiance after the initial confrontation. Peter had to act. The Peter who denied his Lord became the Peter who, in John 21, acted upon his decision by repeatedly affirming his love for his Lord, having experienced the change of mind and course of action predicted by Jesus (Luke 22:32), and becoming the first great evangelist of the post-Resurrection Christian church.

And the seminal moment transpired during an appeal.

## My appeal about appeals

The flight attendant on board the aircraft that brought me to South Bend from Chicago finally gave the other passengers and me permission to deplane. With intentionality and decisiveness, I traversed the long corridor adjacent to the gates and exited the secured area. Soon thereafter, I was greeted by the smiling face and warm embrace of my wife. All I needed was access to the airport terminal so that I could eventually experience sweet communion with my bride.

Preachers of the gospel take the same approach when delivering appeals. We stand between God and the people, speaking with intentionality and decisiveness, desiring for the listeners to let Jesus in because He stands at the doors of their hearts and knocks (Rev. 3:20); He wants nothing less than sweet communion with His bride.

Do you hesitate to make appeals? Do you fear that people will ignore what you have to say to them? Should you and I, rather, trust the Holy Spirit to work on the hearts of our listeners? There is power in God’s Word to sanctify saints and sinners alike (John 17:17). Stand boldly and appeal to the people in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17), and see what God will do through humble vessels of clay! 🙏

- 1 Many homileticians have traditionally defined the parts of the sermon as the introduction, body, conclusion, and appeal. In my teaching, I incorporate a fifth element, the title, right at the beginning. The title proves a critical element that links the listeners to the other vital components of the sermon.
- 2 By using the word *persuade*, I speak in the context of employing pathos. By *pathos*, I speak of appropriately tapping into the human experience that recognizes that humans were created as emotional beings. I do not speak of appealing to or with emotionalism.
- 3 Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 176.
- 4 For further explication, see Bruce E. Gronbeck et al., *Principles and Types of Speech Communication*, 13th ed. (New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, 1997), 35; and Willie Edward Hucks II, “A Preaching Program to Instill Social Consciousness in African-American Churches in Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas,” (DMin diss., Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, 2005), 105–107.

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