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Organizing the Topical Sermon

Steven P. Vitrano

YOU have been asked to preach next Sabbath. What are you going to preach about? Or perhaps the question should be, What *should* you preach about? The reason for changing the question is that preaching is not a matter of proclaiming your words, but God's Word.

What this means is that preaching begins not with man but with God, and for that reason you must begin with God. "Lord, what do You want me to say?" This is the preacher's prayer, and it must ever be so. You should begin your sermon preparation on your knees and with God's Word—the Bible. And as you pray and as you read you must pray and read in faith. God *will* guide you.

This does not mean that Friday night you will pray for a message Sabbath morning. But it means that as soon as you learn of your appointment to preach you will begin talking to God about it. You will begin to "listen" to God as you read His Word. You will carry the matter on your heart. You will reflect, and meditate, and brood over it, and as you do God will impress you with what He wants you to say. He will not give you the whole sermon ready-made so that all you have to do is open your mouth and out it will come. But He will impress you with the theme or lead you to the text He wants you to proclaim.

Whether you proceed topically *or* textually you will always proceed *Biblically*. In other words, as you read and study the Bible you will be impressed to preach upon either one of the great truths of the Bible or one of the great texts of the Bible. Preaching does not concern itself with topics foreign to the Word of God. If this is what is meant by topical preaching, then it has no place in our pulpits.

How does the preacher go about organizing the topical sermon? Suppose you have been impressed to preach on a great Biblical truth, the love of God. What are you going to say about it? What do you know about it? What does the Bible say about it? Do you have any good books or articles on the love of God that rightly represent what the Bible says on the topic, and from which you can gather good quotations, poems, and illustrations? What has Ellen G. White written on the topic?

As you come upon such materials in the course of your study, gather them all together. They will not be in any order or arrangement, but they will all have to do with the theme—the love of God. The next step is to put them in order. You will have to decide how to arrange them in order, but you are not without help. Rhetorical theory or homiletics suggests that the parts of a theme or topic may be arranged in various

ways—chronologically, episodically, logically, or psychologically.

For instance, matters can be arranged in terms of time sequence. What happens first comes first and what happens last comes last, as in a story. In dealing with a great concept or truth, reason may call for a certain progression in the unfolding of the truth. So logical relationships would govern the arrangement in this case. Certain occasions, the nature of the audience, or the relationship between the speaker and the audience might also make it more sensible to start with one thought or idea and proceed to the next. In other words—taking into consideration the audience and the circumstances and the occasion—it might be well to ask the question, What is the first thing that will come to the mind of the audience as this topic is introduced? What will they think of next? In this instance the sermon would be arranged psychologically.

To explain further, let us suppose that the material we have gathered on the topic of the love of God can be organized into four divisions: 1. The love of God and you; 2. The nature of the love of God; 3. The power of the love of God; 4. The revelation of the love of God. In what order should these divisions be arranged? With this topic, the chronological and episodic order do not seem appropriate. What about the logical or psychological? The logical might go something like this:

- I. The revelation of the love of God
- II. The nature of the love of God
- III. The power of the love of God
- IV. The love of God and you

The psychological might look like this:

- I. The love of God and you
- II. The power of the love of God
- III. The nature of the love of God
- IV. The revelation of the love of God

The outline may be expanded to include the main subdivisions under each main division. For instance:

The Love of God

- I. The revelation of the love of God
 - A. The revelation in God's Word—the Bible
 - B. The revelation in God's Son—Jesus Christ
- II. The nature of the love of God
 - A. The love of God is selfless
 - B. The love of God is personal
- III. The power of the love of God
 - A. The love of God gave us His Son
 - B. The love of God moves heaven and earth
- IV. The love of God and you
 - A. You may reject the love of God unto death
 - B. You may accept the love of God unto eternal life

This outline is not intended to suggest that every theme have *four* main divisions and every main division have *two* main subdivisions. The number of divisions may vary, to be sure. Moreover, each main subdivision may have its own subdivisions. But the point is that the material you gather on the theme should be organized, ordered, and arranged so that the message may be clearly understood. This is what is meant by coherence—preaching so that what is said can be "followed" and understood. This principle will be kept in mind as we continue to give study to the preparation of sermons. 