

SECTION 20

The CIT

THE CENTRAL PROPOSITION OF THE TEXT (CPT)/THE CENTRAL PROPOSITION OF THE SERMON (CPS)

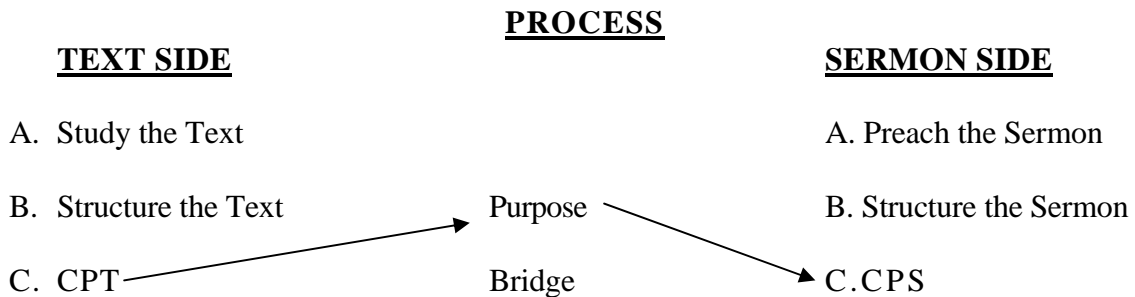
Every sermon should focus on one main idea. If our people leave with one truth they have learned and intend to put into practice, we will have succeeded in our assignment.

Haddon Robinson challenges us to determine the “Big Idea” by asking:

1. What is the author talking about? - and –
2. What is he saying about what he is talking about?

Wayne McDill speaks of “Naming the Textual Idea.”

Ramesh Richard provides a method that balances the “text” and “sermon” aspects of homiletics. Central to his method is the parallel focus on the Central Proposition of the Text (CPT) and the Central Proposition of the Sermon (CPS). One (CPS) grows naturally out of the other (CPT) and insures that our work in the Scriptures and the Sermon will be true to the text.



I. THE CENTRAL PROPOSITION OF THE TEXT (CPT)

The “Heart” of the Passage

At the heart of a paragraph should be one cardinal thought: the “central proposition of the text” (CPT). This proposition is made up of two components: the theme and the thrust. The central proposition is sometimes called by other names: “textual thrust,” “central idea,” “exclusive emphasis,” or the “big idea.”

Components of the Central Proposition

Theme (subject or topic)

Thrust (complement or assertions)

The central proposition is the singular theme/thrust around which the details of the text are woven. Since we want to communicate one major point for the people to hear, understand, and obey, we seek to communicate the major proposition of each Scripture text in contemporary terms.

Reduce your text to a simple proposition ... illustrating the main idea by the various terms in which it is contained. (Charles Simeon in John R. W. Stott, *I Believe in Preaching*, 226)

A. Identifying the Central Proposition of the Text

The central proposition of the text is the single unit of thought that binds together and gives meaning to all the particulars of a text. [In some manner it should relate to your title]

B. What Does the CPT Look Like?

It should always be in the form of a full grammatical sentence.

C. What Does the CPT Contain?

- The *theme* of the text: What is the author talking about in the text?
- The *thrust* of the text: What is the author saying about what he is talking about in the text?

D. From Where Does One Get the CPT?

The CPT is derived from your structuring of the text. In order to get the central proposition of the text, put the content of the subjects, themes, main points, or summaries together. In arriving at the CPT you are looking for accuracy and adequacy. The CPT must precisely reflect your particular text and must cover the assertions of the text.

1) The Theme

The theme of a paragraph should be specific. Grammatical or content cues will tell you which is the controlling theme-what the author is talking about.

2) The Thrust

What is the author saying about the theme?

E. Organizing Your Textual Work

- Give a tentative title to the text. This could well be the “theme” of the CPT.
- If possible write a personal translation or paraphrase of the text reflecting the flow or argument of the text.
- Write out the central proposition of the text. (Put the theme and thrust in full sentence form. The full statement does not need to be long, but make it adequate. You will refine it and shorten it as you work with it.)
- Write out the outline. (All points and sub-points should be in full sentence form.)

Here you are culminating the sermon preparation process as far as the text itself is concerned. If you really desire to be an expositor of the Word of God, you will seek to impress on your people what the author stresses-the truth of his text. A good sermon should have a one-sentence statement that summarizes the passage being preached.

The task is not often easy, but if undertaken, pays rich rewards.

- The preacher avoids the often-heard criticism that expository sermons lack structure.
- The discipline gives the preacher a better understanding of the truths he will share with his people.
- It assists those hearing the sermon to understand the message.
- It allows the preacher to cut unnecessary material from the sermon.

Wayne McDill says a concept needs a name. Define the textual idea precisely in your own mind. Unless it is clearly defined by a careful choice of words, the idea remains vague.

Reflect what the biblical writer is saying. You want to see if what you are calling the subject is actually what the writer is talking about.

Give the textual idea an accurate name so that the same words can be used in the sermon idea. Unless we find the right words to identify the textual idea, how will we ever preach that idea?

Carefully identify all the theological themes in the text for insight into its central idea. You can usually recognize the theological themes in the text by looking at the significant words you see there.

Consider the plain and obvious meaning of the text for indications of the textual idea.

Look for a pivotal verse in the text which may contain the main theme. Though every text does not have a pivotal verse, many will. It will be the one verse which seems to summarize the meaning of the entire section.

II. The Purpose Bridge

The “Brain” of the Sermon

When you cross this bridge, you will have gone from studying the Scriptures—a hermeneutical exercise—towards preaching the Scriptures—the homiletical exercise.

A. The Purpose of Purpose

The purpose controls many aspects of sermon preparation and preaching. A valid and clear purpose of the sermon:

1. focuses the introduction of the sermon on the need that will be raised in the sermon;
2. determines what must be included and/or excluded in the body of the sermon;
3. influences the sermon's conclusion and any application;
4. helps in choosing the illustrations that will help accomplish the purpose of the sermon;
5. provides a more objective way to measure the proficiency or success of the sermon;
6. but most important, the purpose of the sermon directly contributes to the form of the theme of the central proposition of the sermon (CPS).

B. Determining the Purpose of the Sermon

We find the purpose of the sermon (construct the purpose bridge) by asking and answering the following question: *On the basis of the central proposition of this text, what does God want my people to understand and obey?*

C. Connecting the Purpose of Your Text and the Purpose of Your Sermon

Answer two *compatibility questions*.

1. Can I make an exegetical or theological case that my sermon's purpose is compatible with the *purpose* of the text?
2. Can I make a sociological or psychological case that my sermon's purpose is compatible with the *needs* of my audience? This question enables one to be relevant to the audience.

There are few good sermons that are generic to every audience. “Long distance” shepherding is neither biblically approved nor congregationally appreciated.

D. The Purpose Bridge

Number one issue: What are the needs and conditions of my audience?

You are both liberated and limited by the central proposition of the text. You must choose the sermonic purpose and fine tune it to the audience to whom you minister.

Two purposes are legitimately drawn from most text. The first is content oriented; the second behavior oriented. Your purpose statement will almost always, in raw form, provide the *theme* of the central proposition of the sermon.

III. The Central Proposition of the Sermon (CPS) *The “Heart” of the Sermon*

Here the central proposition of the text is channeled through the purpose. It is then contemporized by the central proposition of the sermon. The CPS takes you into the homiletical aspects of the sermon preparation process.

For the sermon, as a living word from God to his people, should make its impact on them then and there. They will not remember the details. We should not expect them to do so. But they should remember the dominant thought, because all the sermon’s details have been marshaled to help them grasp its message and feel its power.

John R. W. Stott,
I Believe in Preaching, 225

The subject answers the question, What is the sermon about? ... Whether a sermon has two points or ten points, it must have one point, it must be about something.

John A. Broadus,
On the Preparation and Delivery of a Sermon, 38

The first thing in making a sermon, the *sine qua non*, is the idea. There can be no sermon that was not first preceded by an idea or a theme.

John Killinger,
Fundamentals of Preaching, 44

I have a conviction that no sermon is ready for preaching, not ready for writing out, until we can express its theme in a short, pregnant sentence as clear as crystal. I find the getting of that sentence is the hardest, the most exacting, and the most fruitful labour in my study.

J. H. Jowett,
The Preacher: His Life and World, 133

Haddon Robinson says ideally each sermon is the explanation, interpretation, or application of a single dominant idea supported by other ideas, all drawn from one passage or several passages of Scripture. He notes that sermons fail because:

- a. They have too many ideas; but more often they deal with unrelated ideas.
- b. Preachers may conceive of sermons as a collection of points that have little relationship to each other.

- c. Fragmentation; little more than scattered comments based on words and phrases from a passage.

Too many so-called expositors simply make the one central idea the substance of their message. The narrative may be read or retold, but the sermon is essentially their central expository idea-it is explained, illustrated, and applied without further recourse to the text. This approach is not valid exegetical exposition. In exegetical exposition, the substance of the exposition must be clearly derived from the text so that the central idea unfolds in the analysis of the passage and so that all parts of the passage may be interpreted to show their contribution to the theological idea.

Allen P. Ross,
Creation and Blessing, 47

Concerning the importance of the central idea, Robinson says:

- a. It is to provide the easy and unmistakable emergence of the thesis through the unfolding of the contents of the speech.
- b. It is for the mind to grasp and assimilate the points of a sermon.
- c. It is to make a sermon as clear as a crystal.
- d. Effective sermons major in biblical ideas brought together into an overarching unity.
- e. Bad ideas offer explanation of experience that do not reflect reality.

A. Coming Up with the CPS

The sermon process is thoroughly integrated. Our study (step one) and structure (step two) influence the central proposition of the text (step three). The CPT influences the purpose of the sermon (step four). From the purpose of the sermon, we have to articulate the central proposition of the sermon (step five).

Just as the text has a singular theme/thrust, your sermon must have a singular theme/thrust as well. For the CPS, you ask the key questions, of yourself rather than of the biblical author.

The Central Proposition of the Sermon

Theme: What am I talking about?

Thrust: What am I saying about what I am talking about?

It is often possible to turn the purpose of the sermon into the theme of the sermon.

The thrust of the CPS may take a number of forms:

1. The theme may have to be proved.
2. The theme may have to be explained.
3. The CPS may have a multiple thrust to the theme.

B. Contemporization

Several angles can (must) be probed in contemporization.

1) Contemporization of the Proposition

You may use some catchy words. To contemporize is “to make contemporary.” These “contemporizations” stick in the hearer’s mind. The theme of the CPS may double as your sermon title.

2) Contemporization of Words

This is basically an updating of vocabulary for effect and impact. Use a few “catchy” words.

3) Contemporization of Audience

Your CPS and main points have to be personalized to this specific audience.

4) Alliteration

While contemporization is always good and necessary, alliteration may not be so. Alliteration is to help the sermon and not to harrass the text! Alliteration is good if it makes the central proposition and main points less obscure and more memorable (and if you are good at it!).

Haddon Robinson says, the purpose of the sermon (CPS) states what one expects to happen in the hearer as a result of preaching this sermon, it defines what the truth should accomplish. An expositor determines the purpose of his sermon by discovering the purpose behind the passage he is preaching.

- 1) Why did the author write this?
- 2) What effect did he expect it to have on his readers?

A purpose statement not only describes the destination and the route we will follow to get there, but also tells how we can know if we have arrived.

Summation

I. What is the CPS?

1. *It is a statement that focuses your sermon toward changing lives in some specific way.*

Spurgeon said (as cited by Stott):

It is of no use to fire your rye into the sky, when your object is to pierce men's hearts. To flourish your saber finely is one thing which has been done so often that you need not repeat it. Your work is to charge home at the heart and conscience. Fire into the very center of the foe. Aim at effect ... effect upon the conscience and upon the heart. Some preachers remind me of the famous Chinese jugglers, who not long ago were everywhere advertised. One of those stood against a wall, and the other threw knives at him. One knife would be driven into the board just above his head, and another close by his ear, while under his armpit and between his fingers quite a number of deadly weapons were bristling. Wonderful art to be able to throw to a hair's breadth and never strike! How many among us have a marvelous skill in missing. (Stott 1982, 251).

2. *It is a statement that allows you to begin the sermon with the end insight.*

3. *It is a statement that moves the sermon from knowledge into everyday life.*

II. What is the Value of the CPS for the Sermon?

1. *It keeps the sermon unified*
2. *It provides clarity.*
3. *It simplifies the evaluation process.*
4. *It creates excitement in the preacher's life*
5. *It helps the sermon maintain a sense of progress.*

Guidelines for the

Sermon Idea

(CPS)

- Develop the SI with your audience in mind.
- State the SI in the most memorable sentence possible.
- State it positively, not negatively if possible.
- State it in the active voice, not the passive voice if possible.
- State it in words or phrases which are precise, concrete, and familiar to your listeners.
- State it so that the truth is readily seen as relevant to your audience and their needs.

Characteristics of the Sermon Idea

(SI)

- It is derived from the main idea.
- It is what the preacher is saying.
- It is a carefully worded statement.
- It is geared to the audience.
- It has a subject and a complement.
- It is a complete sentence.