

Shaping the talk

Steve Jones, Senior Pastor, Oxford Community Church

Why have a shape?

Cultures differ in their approach: the western educated mind prefers things to be more linear than do some Asian civilisations. People differ too: some like things more neatly organised, others prefer sweeping flow.

So, there are lots of possible approaches: a story, ten top tips, a stream of consciousness.

But there are reasons behind the classic shape of three main points.

Why have any shape at all?

- It may help things be memorable
- More importantly, you need some shape because you're trying to get somewhere.

Without any shape, we tend to meander around, and no one knows quite what we're driving at.

"Good thoughts abound, but the art of organising them does not." (Pascal, 1623-1662)

A good shape will make it clear where you're going, and make it easier for people to come with you.



The introduction

If you don't gain people's interest early on, you are likely not to have their attention throughout.

Tell people what question your talk will answer, or what problem you will solve.

Main points

The main points need to relate to the Bible

With an expository sermon, we preach what this text says (with an eye on the rest of scripture).
With a thematic sermon, we preach what the Bible says (with reference to specific texts)

The most common approach is therefore to have one main point for each sub-division of your text (or for each of your texts).

A moderate number of main points

If we have just one, it tends not to carry people very far.

If we have too many (more than 5?), then each extra one tends to weaken the main point – as people have less sense of what we're driving at.

NB: This may mean that it's wise not to preach the whole of a passage that you've been given.

Prayerful Inspiration

Having mined the text for its message, there is a need to lay it before God in prayer, and ask what he wants to do with these ingredients. Where does he want to lead people? What is he intending to do? Or what response will he seek?

This is gives a 'prophetic edge.' You know you've got it when you can sum it up in one phrase.

Then, what are the main points that will lead people there?

Ruthlessly cull what's not essential

We often start wondering if we'll have enough, and then typically end up with too much

Think like a sculptor carving a statue – less is more.

Things that serve as unhelpful tangents

- History lessons and language lessons (Hebrew and Greek): is this really necessary?
- Powerful illustrations that don't really illustrate the point
- My latest testimony
- Every detail in the passage

What most needs cutting *hardest* is usually the content that you're *keenest* to include, as it's what is currently personally inspiring you!

Things that make for bad headings

- Unclear / not quite saying what you mean (use a thesaurus)
- Too general (e.g. "The Word of God," "The Fear of God")
- Too tentative ("I think")
- Too much 'what we ought to do' (better to major on declaring what God's done/doing)

Flow

If people are going to come with you, it helps hugely for them to be given a thread to follow:

- Do your main points follow one another, or head in contrasting different directions?
- Not just about logical flow, but emotional flow.
- Allow intensity to rise and fall, rather than being all flat or all fever pitch. Aim to have some climax at the points where it matters.
- Beware tangents, else you'll lose people. (And not just the planned ones, but the 'off piste' comments.)

Leading Response

You have a prophetic edge, you've taken people with you and you're expecting something to happen – so a response is needed.

Be aware of a range of possible responses:

- Commitment
- Repentance
- Intercession
- Worship
- Receiving prayer
- Speaking blessing
- Reading a creed
- Writing a letter to a persecuted believer

We each have a preference – but what kind of response does the message demand?

Workshop

Critique the following sermon outline:

- Is its message based in the passage?
- Does it miss important truths from the passage?
- Does it lead to a clear response?

Luke 7:1-10 – The faith of the centurion

Introduction

Many today are living defeated lives. Rather than live a defeated life, you can live in victory if you will discover a wonderful principle called kingdom authority.

Today, I want us to understand what the Bible teaches about kingdom authority. What does it mean to live in kingdom authority?

1. The Source of kingdom authority

All authority comes down from a higher power. Authority comes from above. That's why we say that we are "under" someone's authority. The Centurion understood being under authority (vs. 8). Likewise, in Christ we have incredible authority. Why? We are united with Jesus. Our authority comes from Him.

2. The secret of kingdom authority

All authority is linked to obedience (vs. 8). You cannot have authority until you get under the authority that is over you. That's the reason that Satan worked to get Adam to disobey. When Adam disobeyed, he forfeited his authority. God does not give kingdom authority to rebels. If you do not learn to be under, you will not be over.

3. The scope of kingdom authority

When the Lord gives you authority, He gives you spiritual authority (Luke 10:18-19). God gave Adam authority over the physical realm (Gen. 1:27-28). We still have that. In Christ, though, one day we will have full spiritual authority (Hebrews 2:6-8). Our full inheritance is waiting until Jesus returns. We do not yet see all things put under Him. But in this day and in this age, he has given us authority over the enemy (2 Peter 1:3). That is the scope of your kingdom authority.

4. The strength of kingdom authority

The Centurion understood the strength of authority. He surrendered to someone else's authority (vv.7-8). Strength for the Christian life comes from surrender. Our spiritual strength comes because we are surrendered to Jesus Christ.

Authority differs from power. Authority comes from the office. Power resides in the person. Sportsmen with muscles have power. The referee, who may be a little guy, has the authority.

Jesus says, "I give you authority over all the power of the enemy." Our strength comes from His authority. It's time we told the enemy to take a hike. Because you have kingdom authority, you don't have to live a defeated life.