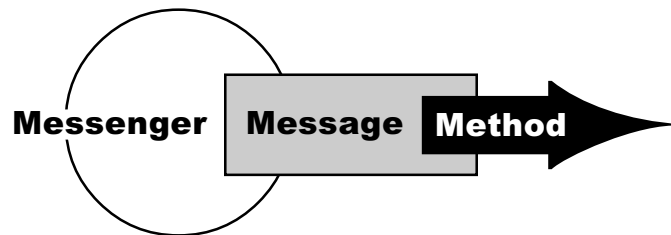


How to Teach God's Word

3

Principles of Preparation

In **Module 103**, we have been looking at the three parts to the communication of truth from God's Word.



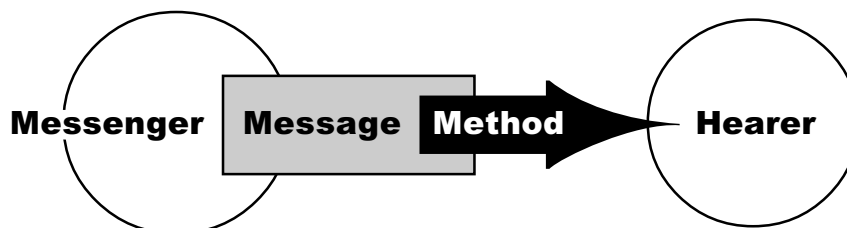
In our lessons so far, we have been studying individual aspects of this equation.

- In **ES103-01**, we looked at the *first* element – the **Messenger**
- In **ES103-02**, we focused on the *second* element – the **Message**.
- In this lesson, we begin looking at the *third* element – the **Method**.

This third element – the Method – can be divided into two parts:

- Preparation of the Message
- Delivery of the Message

It is this first part – preparation of the Message – that we will be looking at in this lesson. But just before we begin looking at how the methods of teaching God's Word are designed to work, we must first add a fourth element to our diagram – the **Hearer**.



You may notice that we put both the *preparation* and *delivery* of your message under the heading “method.” This may seem a little unusual at first. It would be easy to think that since you are *preparing* a message, this is in fact the message. But what you are actually preparing for is the *delivery* of that message. You are seeking to order your thoughts and capture them in such a way that you will be able to teach them effectively.

The message, on the other hand, is the core revelation that you are seeking to impart. The message is what God wants to say to the people. Everything else is trapping. The way that you order it, the illustrations you use, even the words you choose, are all designed to help communicate that message to the hearer. They are not the *message* itself, but are rather part of the *method* of communication.

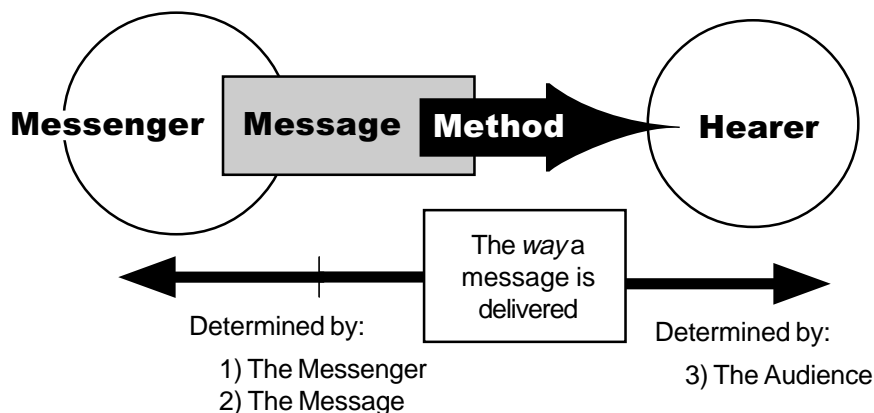
Think of it this way. If you want to give a friend a gift, you may decide to wrap it up in pretty giftwrap, tied up with a ribbon. When you finally give your friend the gift, it looks beautiful, but your friend knows that there is more to the gift than just the wrapping.

What if your friend opened up the gift only to find an empty box? Wouldn't he feel cheated? Although he had expected a *gift*, he had received only the *giftwrap*.

This is what the difference between the *message* and the *method* is like. The message is the gift; the method is the giftwrap.

Shaping the Method

As we have already mentioned, much focus is often placed on the methodology of teaching or preaching God's Word. But the *method* should flow from the previous two elements – the *messenger* and the *message* – and be targeted at the fourth element – the *hearer*.



The hearer – either one person or many – is the aim of the preparation of your message and the delivery of your message. In order to understand how God views this preparation and delivery process, let's use a simple illustration:

Imagine you are an archer, just learning to shoot with a bow and an arrow. The master instructor is at your side, leaning over your shoulder, teaching you to draw back on the bow. He makes sure that your arm is extended correctly, that your fingers are placed properly, and that the arrow is in position. He tells you to take aim. You close one eye, sighting along the arrow toward the target. You let the arrow fly. It zips toward its target and, with a satisfying *twang*, it hits the bullseye.



Teaching God's Word is similar to shooting an arrow. You are not just shooting aimlessly; you are aiming at a target – the hearer's heart. In fact, of all the principles that we can teach at the Online Bible College, the two most important are that your message must be:

- God-centered
- Hearer-targeted

Targeting the Hearer

Read Colossians 1:6

The powerful results listed in this verse – the Gospel “bearing fruit and growing” all over the world – came about because the Colossians “heard” and “understood.” It is not enough for a person just to *hear* God's Word; a person must also *understand* God's Word. The Word of God has to be explained and phrased in such a way so as it is understood clearly by those hearing.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13

A message taught or preached cannot be considered successful unless it is taken on board by your hearers. If your audience accepts what you say “not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God,” it is at that point that the Holy Spirit is able to apply the power of His Word to the heart of the hearer. Only when the hearer recognizes the divine origin of that Word, says Paul, does the Word begin to do its “work in [those] who believe.”

Note how Paul emphasizes that God's work is in “you who believe.” Faith is the key ingredient on the hearer's side which makes the difference between “That was a nice sermon” and “That changed my life.”

Read Hebrews 4:2

Faith is a gift from God (**Ephesians 2:8**), and when it is mixed with the preached Word, the result is life. In **Romans 10:17**, Paul declares:

“Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”

Unless faith is released, the message does not achieve what God intends. To understand more fully how this works, let’s look at what happens when a person first responds to the message of salvation.



Read Ephesians 1:13

Note the progress listed in this verse:

- “...when you *heard* the word of truth...”
– The message preached is both heard and understood.
- “...having *believed*...” – There is a release of faith in response to the message from God.
- “...you were *marked*...with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit...” – This faith releases the Holy Spirit to do a work of transformation within the heart of the hearer.

This corresponds with the three-step process of transformation that we have established from the beginning of your studies with the Online Bible College. These three steps are:

- **Revelation** – “...you *heard*...” –
- **Repentance** – “...having *believed*...”
- **Reality** – “...you were *marked*...”

The three steps of transformation – revelation, repentance and reality – are exactly what you are desiring to see happen in the life of your hearers as you teach the Word of God. In the same way that the Holy Spirit has been leading you personally through the process of revelation, repentance and reality, so now you too, as you teach the Word, are cooperating with the Holy Spirit as he leads your hearers through the same process.

No Set Formulas

Because your message is to be God-centered and hearer-targeted, this means there are no set formulas which apply to every situation. The suggestions we give in this module are only designed to be starting points for you, not rigid principles which you must adhere to in order to “successfully” preach a “nice” sermon.* God is not interested in “nice” sermons. He wants to communicate his Word to people.

* You may notice that we rarely use the word “sermon” at the Online Bible College. We prefer the term “message” since this is less religious and, we believe, closer to the biblical meaning. In people’s minds, a sermon is something to be listened to. A message, however, is something to be heeded.

Any guidelines we provide in this lesson are simply “rules of thumb,” not unbreakable rules. In fact, once they are understood, you are in a position to break them – to experiment to find what ways of communication are more effective.

The reason for this is simple. Stereotyped formats of communication are the least effective means of communication. What communicates the best to people is the unexpected, that which breaks the mold. Take a look at the following styles of communication and note how they broke the mold.

Read Ezekiel 4-5

Read 2 Samuel 12:1-13

One example of a message that broke all the rules was given by a good friend of ours, Juan Carlos (Johnny) Ortiz, at that time a pastor in Argentina. One Sunday, when it came time for the usual time of preaching, Johnny stood up, got behind the pulpit, and spoke these words: “Love one another.” Then he sat down. The next Sunday, he did exactly the same thing, and then the Sunday after that. By the third Sunday, his church was beginning to get the message.

There are countless ways in which we can communicate God’s Word outside of the normal “sermon” format. One way is to use an existing circumstance or situation and turn it into an object lesson (note [Luke 7:36-47](#); [9:46-48](#)). A word of warning, however. If you use any one particular communication style repeatedly to the same audience, the effectiveness of your communication slowly deteriorates. For this reason, the most important rule of thumb in communication is: *Be fresh in your approach.*

This need for freshness has an added benefit. It throws you back onto dependence upon God. After learning how to teach God’s Word effectively, the temptation is to fall into a rut, to follow the familiar patterns, to become comfortable in what you know. But this must be avoided at all costs.

We are now going to provide you with a very simple outline for a beginner’s teaching style. This format is like learner wheels on a child’s bicycle. Do not think of these guidelines as steadfast and eternal rules. They are simply there to give some form to your message, a starting point for learning how to order your message in a clear and effective way.

Learner Wheels

There are useful guidelines, however, that will help you in the preparation and delivery of your message. A classic format for a simple expository message may follow a pattern something like this:

- Introduction
- Scripture
- Explanation
- Illustration
- Application

Let's have a look at each part of this teaching format in turn.

Introduction

Although it is entirely possible to simply begin with a "Let's open our Bibles to..." this is not generally the best way to begin a message. Due to the brevity of communication in the modern media (the average commercial lasts for 15 seconds), the modern hearer is accustomed to compacted time spans for communication. Recent research has shown that a hearer generally decides in the first 30 seconds of a message whether he or she is interested in what the speaker has to say.¹

The purpose of an introduction is to capture the hearer, to involve them from the beginning in the message that God wants to bring. You are wanting to evoke a response of "Hey, I want to hear this" from the hearer.

Although some preachers prepare and practise their introduction, we recommend that you do *not* prepare your introduction beforehand. And for a good reason. The introduction sets the pace not only for the message, but also for your style of presentation. A prepared introduction will generally mean a highly rigid message. The alternative to a prepared *introduction*, however, is a prepared *messenger*.

It's important to realize that the preparation of your message does not end when you finish your notes. In the leadtime prior to your message, ask the Lord to how you would like to introduce the message. Take note of the following things:

- **Worship** – Open your eyes while the people are worshiping. Look around and take note of where the people are as they sing. Are they truly worshipping God or simply going through the motions? This is a good indication of the preparedness of their hearts.
- **Words** – God does not start speaking when the main message begins. He is speaking during the time of worship and, possibly, through prophetic words or other words of encouragement that may come during the meeting. If someone shares a testimony, for example, note what God is seeking to say through that testimony. Take it up in your introduction.
- **Events** – Take particular note of special events that are taking place in the church. By re-mentioning an evangelistic rally or an upcoming time of prayer and fasting, for example, you can effectively introduce the message you are about to bring.

An introduction should flow on from where the people are and take them into the Word of God. It is a springboard that prepares them for the excitement of discovery in the Word. Here are some points that can help you introduce your message.

- **Comment on the worship** – take note of a particular song, or a line in a song, that flows straight into your message.
- **Encourage the people to have an open heart** – talk about how God wants each person to open their heart to his Word. Raise their expectation for hearing from God in his Word.

- **Pray for openness of heart** – by inviting the congregation to join you in prayer and asking God to give revelation in his Word, this can be a powerful means of preparing the hearts of the people for receiving the Word of God (note **Ephesians 1:17-18**; **Philippians 1:9-11**; **Colossians 1:9-12**).

Remember, these are learning wheels only. Your aim is to see where the people are, so that you can take them by the hand and lead them into God's Word.

Scripture

The core of your message must be Scripture. The main passage that you choose should be determined by the revelation that God has given you in his Word.

Explanation

Either after reading Scripture, or in stages during the reading of the passage, you should explain the meaning of God's Word. The focus of this explanation must be the revelation that God has brought. This is what makes the difference between dry exposition and a Word which is "alive and active" (**Hebrews 4:12**).

Although there are no steadfast rules, your explanation of the scripture passage should include:

- *A revelation of God* in the passage
- *A revelation of the human condition* in the passage
- *A revelation of God's way* in the passage

We recommend that the first focus always be the revelation of who God is. God's glory is the benchmark of our lives, not where we fall short of God's glory. The starting point is a lifted vision, not a realization of human fallenness. It is from there that you can effectively contrast where the hearer is right now.

Illustration

The art of teaching God's Word is to take the hearer from the known to the unknown. For this reason, using illustrations is one of the most powerful teaching methods you can use. An illustration uses a known, familiar experience to explain something that has not yet been experienced by the hearer.

The purpose of an illustration is *not* to entertain. It is *not* to "lighten up" a sermon or to make it more interesting. It is to bring a person face to face with the stark reality of their situation and the need for change. To do this it can be humorous or sobering, but its sole purpose is to illustrate the meaning of Scripture.

Don't think of an illustration as being just a story. A story can be an effective illustration because it evokes the imagination of the hearer, involves them in the process of being taught. A story places the hearer in the middle of the message, by inviting them to join with the story's hero or heroine.

But there are also other forms of illustration. For example, a powerful means of illustration is to enact something out. Have a look at one example of Jesus' teaching to see how he enacted out his message.

Read John 13:1-17

Anything can be used as an object lesson: a book, a painting, a person from the congregation.* John Sung, the famous Chinese evangelist called “The Flame of the Far East,” would often use anything around him to illustrate his message. No potted plant was safe near him. To illustrate what he meant by dealing ruthlessly with sin, he would often grab the nearest plant, uproot it from its pot, and jump on it, stamping on it until it was totally destroyed. “That,” he would say, “is what you do with sin.” But people got his message.

The most powerful illustrations are those with a shock value. By shock value, we don’t mean blood and gore, or something that offends the audience’s sensibilities. Rather, we mean a story with an unexpected and surprising outcome. For an example of an illustration with shock value, take a look at this parable.

Read Luke 10:35-37

The hearers of this parable agreed totally with Jesus’ assessment of the priest and the Levite. They were in character. They would never touch a person who appeared half-dead, in case he truly was dead, for then they would become ceremonially “unclean” (see **Leviticus 11:31; 21:10-11**). But the hearers expected that the third person would probably be a Pharisee, for part of the code of the Pharisees was to help their fellow man. Yet Jesus turned the whole story upside down by making the third person someone totally unexpected – a Samaritan, whom the Jews considered accursed. The shock effect of the story brought Jesus’ point home clearly to his hearers.

Application

This is the most important part of the message, for it encourages a person to move from being merely a “hearer” to a “doer” of the Word (**James 1:22-25**). If God has been speaking through your message – if your hearers have had a revelation in God’s Word – then there will be a question foremost in their minds:

“What am I supposed to do?” (note **Acts 2:37**).

Do you remember the process that the Holy Spirit leads every Christian through?

- ➡ Revelation
- ➡ Repentance
- ➡ Reality

If you have been successfully communicating from God’s Word, there should already be *revelation*. Now the next important step is *repentance*. This is what the application stage of your message is all about. This is the point of challenge, where you apply the Word of God directly at the point of the hearers’ need.

In the application stage, it is useful to remember the “escape-embrace principle” (read again **2 Peter 1:4**). The challenge of God’s Word is always to escape some-

* Be careful not to purposely embarrass anyone. It is usually helpful to get a person’s permission ahead of time to use them as part of an illustration you want to bring.

thing and embrace something else. This is the essence of repentance: Turning from something to something.

As you can appreciate, we have only described very briefly the five stages of a classic preaching pattern. A short message (of between 15-20 minutes) will generally follow through the sequence just once. But for longer messages, parts of the sequence may be repeated, as follows:

- Introduction
- A. Scripture/Explanation/Illustration
- B. Scripture/Explanation/Illustration
- C. Scripture/Explanation/Illustration
- Application

The possible variations are almost limitless, and as you become more experienced in teaching God's Word, you can experiment with many of them. Remember, the pattern we've given you is a good starting point, but it is not the only one. The important thing is to allow a pattern like this to assist you, not to box you in. Remember, it is the message that determines the method, not the method which determines the message.

The guidelines we have given in this lesson are learner wheels only. Like the learner wheels on a bicycle, there comes a time when you must remove them and begin riding for yourself. As we continue to emphasize, the rules are not designed to box you in. But it is helpful to learn the rules before you begin to break the rules.

The Use of Patterns

The human mind constantly looks for patterns. This is part of how God has created the mind as an information-gathering and information-processing mechanism. Therefore, if we expose a pattern in God's Word, this makes it much easier for the hearer to understand what God is saying.

There are many approaches used by preachers to help their hearers get a handle on and remember the Word of God using patterns. These are generally some kind of pattern device, called a *mnemonic*, of which the following are just a few of the more common types:

Alliteration

Alliteration is the use of the same letter or sound at the beginning of every major heading. We occasionally use alliteration in our teaching at the Online Bible College. An example of this is: *Revelation, Repentance, Reality*. Another example, used in this module is: *Messenger, Message, Method*.

Alliteration can be a helpful memory aid, but beware of trying to force your message artificially into an alliteration pattern. As with any teaching technique, if alliteration is overused, its effectiveness as a method of communication begins to degrade over time.

Assonance

People remember rhyming phrases much easier than any other kind of phrase. Sometimes, the main points of your message can be made into a rhyme or assonance. Again, beware of forcing your message artificially into a rhyming pattern.

As an example, look back- at page 6. There we listed a sequence of five stages to a beginner's preaching pattern: *Introduction, Scripture, Explanation, Illustration, Application*. Do you notice they all rhyme, except for *Scripture*? We could easily have listed a better rhyming sequence: *Introduction, Quotation, Explanation, Illustration, Application*, but in doing so, it would have become harder to understand. Never let a communication technique get in the way of communication.

Acronyms

Another memory device is the use of the first letters of your main points to form an acronym, such as training people for evangelism based on the acronym CARE – *Compassion, Aid, Relationship, Evangelism*. Another example of an acronym is GRACE – *God's Riches At Christ's Expense*.

Balanced Grammar

This is another helpful pattern, based on sentence construction. For example, if you look back to page 7, you will see that we use this pattern of balanced grammar: *A revelation of God in the passage, A revelation of the human condition in the passage, A revelation of God's way in the passage*. Each point begins with "A revelation of..."

Balanced Concepts

The use of two opposing concepts in balance. Take a look, for example, at page 8 of **Lesson ES103-02**. Do you notice, toward the bottom of the page, how we use two opposing concepts in balance: *The word of death, The word of life*.

Apart from these imposed techniques, however, the most powerful method is to look for patterns *within Scripture*. This is a connect-the-dots kind of approach to the Scripture. Better than any imposed memory aid is the strength of the revelation itself. If you bring the Word to life for the congregation, it is the Word which produces the transformation that God desires. Any mnemonic techniques that you may use should only be to help the communication of that revelation.

Three Parts to Preparation

This lesson has been focusing on the principles of preparation. There are three parts to preparation before speaking a message from God.

Preparation of the Messenger

No principles of preaching can substitute for the in-the-closet type of prayer relationship with God. The messenger needs to be prepared before the message

itself can be prepared. This preparation of the messenger must involve to things:

- Identification with God and his Word
- Identification with the hearers and their need

As you prepare yourself before the Lord, ask the Lord what he wants to say to the people. God will always address where the people are – in terms of their human condition – in order to bring them closer to himself.

Preparation of the Message

When you have identified the core revelation that God wants you to share, outline your notes in such a way that you can refer to them at a glance and know a) where you are in your message, and b) what comes next.

Knowing how long the duration of your message should be will also determine the outlining of your message. There are four basic lengths of message:

- **Nuggets:** 2-10 minutes
- **Short Messages:** 15-20 minutes
- **Medium Messages:** 30-40 minutes
- **Long Messages:** 50-60 minute sharing

It is generally wise to begin with shorter messages and begin sharing longer messages only as your capacity and the capacity of your hearers grow.

Preparation of the Hearer

Read Revelation 3:22

Most people understand the need of preparing themselves and their message, but it is equally important the hearers also be prepared for the message. This preparation is done in three stages:

- **In prayer**, as part of your preparation for the message. Pray that God will prepare the hearts of those who will hear the Word.
- **In worship**, before the message is brought. Worship is the active participation of a congregation in reaching out to God. There is no more important time of preparing the hearer than during the time of worship.
- **In your introduction**, before you lead people into the Word of God.

The Core of the Message

Read 1 Corinthians 2:2

Whatever your message may be, the core of that message must always be the Cross. Never just talk about where God wants the hearer to be. Never just talk about the condition that the hearer is in. Always speak about God's way of bringing the hearer from where they are to where God wants them to be. That way is the Cross of Christ.

As Thomas Jones, a professor at Covenant Theological Seminary, once said:

“True Christian preaching must center on the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross is the central doctrine of the holy scriptures. All over revealed truths either find their fulfillment in the cross or are necessarily founded upon it. Therefore, no doctrine of Scripture may faithfully be set before men unless it is displayed in its relationship to the cross. The one who is called to preach, therefore, must preach Christ because *there is no other message from God.*”²

Read Romans 1:16

The same Paul who said, “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified,” also said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God...”

If you desire to see the power of God’s Word impact the lives of your hearers, tap into the power of the Gospel. As God prepares you, as his messenger, and the message he wants to bring through you, he will truly make your tongue into a sharpened sword and your life into a sharpened arrow (**Isaiah 49:2**).

We trust you will begin to put the principles found in this lesson to good use. But after all is said and done, remember this one thing:

There are no formulas, except one: *Closeness with God.*

¹ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), p.229.

² Thomas F. Jones, “Preaching the Cross of Christ,” an unpublished essay presented in 1976-77 homiletics lectures at Covenant Theological Seminary, quoted by Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), p.271.