

the first fifteen *the joy of discovery*

Throughout this exercise it is important that we keep the brakes
on both the urge to interpret and the urge to apply
until we have observed fully what the Bible is actually saying.
this is the key to boredom-busting preaching

"What it means?" (exegesis) students rush to this one!
and

"How it affects my life?" (application) pastors rush to this one!
follows

"What is the text actually saying?" (observation)

The end result of this exercise is a smorgasbord of observations
from which we have a healthy feed and then go on to feed others.

What follows is what I do with the first 3-5 hours of my sermon preparation

Key concerns: (a) *have I experienced the joy of discovering truth for myself?*

(b) *do I really know how to look at the text?*

... fully? there are various blindspots which we do not see

... carefully? there are various details that we miss in what we do see

... accurately? there are things we see incorrectly

Examples: travelling on the Cook Strait Ferry to the South Island, seeing more and more

Before you start – and throughout the process – there is this need to establish an ongoing spoken dialogue with God in prayer and a dependence on his Spirit. We are not dissecting a dead frog here. If we are not careful, exegetical method can become exactly that! Nor are we concocting a chemistry experiment in the lab. We must consciously utilize the objective and subjective poles of who we are - we analyze and scrutinize; we impressionize and instinctize - and in it all we are desperately dependent on the indispensable Spirit of God!

Step One: Read and reread the passage (and do so aloud!) in its context

*"There is nothing magical in reading
it is in rereading that something magical may be had."*

'I have learnt that if I don't talk to my Bible, my Bible isn't likely to talk to me!' (Wiersbe)

"Listen to the text, absorb it, wrestle with it, digest it, immerse in it, breath it in as God's breath, pray over it. The greatest danger you will face is that you will focus too narrowly or quickly on some features of the text and, by neglecting the surrounding details, will misinterpret the whole."

(Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Baker, 1994) 103-104)

Three areas on which to focus with this initial reading and rereading:

- (i) Make a note of your own early responses to a range of issues. What are those first impressions? What are those first reactions – grab them ... because they are likely to be those of your audience as well. Things like: the questions sparked? feelings surfaced? flashes of insight?
- (ii) Allow the senses a little space – and give your imagination some scope. Read the passage 'through' each sense as it were: What can you see? hear? smell? touch? taste?
- (iii) Take your text into a variety of places and read it in the midst of the life swirling around you. What is it like to read the story of the prodigal son as you sit at a bench in a shopping mall? What happens to the story of the raising of Lazarus in the waiting room of the hospital?

While we must be quick to affirm that what Bible readers' often claim to be a flash of the Spirit's inspiration granting them a deeper understanding can often be the fruit of an overactive imagination in combination with a lazy and undisciplined mind (and therefore to be rejected), *it is still critical that we allow our imagination and creativity a longer leash at the outset of our study of the Bible with a view to preaching it.* Later on we can restrain any errant thoughts (we must!) – after all the Spirit is, first and foremost, the Spirit of truth. He wants no error ascribed to him. Accuracy is important - but not quite yet!

Step Two: Decide on the unit of thought for the passage you wish to study

At this point I cannot advocate too strongly the helpfulness of a computer generated text that is devoid of verse and paragraph divisions. The most helpful way to begin a study of a biblical passage (with the sermon in view) is to begin with just such a text and by reading and rereading come to your own conclusions about where the paragraphs divide (or 'scenes', if dealing with a story/narrative text).

Step Three: Utilize a variety of translations

Debates about which is the best translation are fruitless and distracting for the preacher!
One from each of these groups is a good start:

- a literal one: (NKJV, NASB, NRSV, Jerusalem)
- a 'dynamic equivalent' : (GNB, TNIV, New Living)
- a paraphrase: (Philips, CEV, The Message, Living)

Either have a copy of each open before you, or photocopy the passage in each version.
Compare them phrase-by-phrase, line-by-line and jot down any striking differences.

Step Four: Identify everyone in the passage and jot down everything about them

I like to write the various people mentioned in the text across the page and gather my observations in columns below each name - one observation per line.

Let the smorgasbord begin!

Be very pedantic - sharpen up your observation faculty!

Step Five: Finish off Rudyard Kipling's questions

"I have six faithful serving men who taught me all I know:
their names are *what* and *where* and *when*;
and *who* and *how* and *who*."

We've done 'Who?'

'Why?' and 'How?' will figure a little later.

So, at this point, let's focus on the three "W's" that are left.

What? . . . list below all the 'non-person' nouns, subjects, and things in the text
& gather any and all textual observations about them

Where? . . . list any references to places and locations in the text
& gather any and all textual observations about them

When? . . . list any references to time in the text
& gather any and all textual observations about them

Step Six: Identify every verb in the passage - the 'action' words

Again, down the left hand side of the page below, list all the verbs in the text and next to each entry make four observations (where it is possible without getting too complicated) about those verbs:

- (a) Who is doing the action?
- (b) To whom is the action being done?
- (c) When was the action done: past, present, or future?
- (d) Single out those ones which are commands, or 'imperatives'

This step can become bogged down - so whenever it does I tend to move straight on to the next verb & I don't tend to pause over the verb "to be" or "to have".

Step Seven: List every word that repeats

Simply write them on a piece of paper.

Maybe make some preliminary assessment as to their significance.

Later on, commentaries will help you at this point.

NB - ideally, it is the repetition in the original languages that may prove significant. The *NIV Exhaustive Concordance* has an index in the back that can uncover the original Greek and Hebrew words for those who have not had the opportunity to learn those languages.

Step Eight: Begin to meditate upon the 'the little words that mean so much'

(a) the connectives - these are the hinges on which the passage swings:

after, then, therefore, but, as, indeed, otherwise, because,
for, so that, if, where, however, finally, when . . .

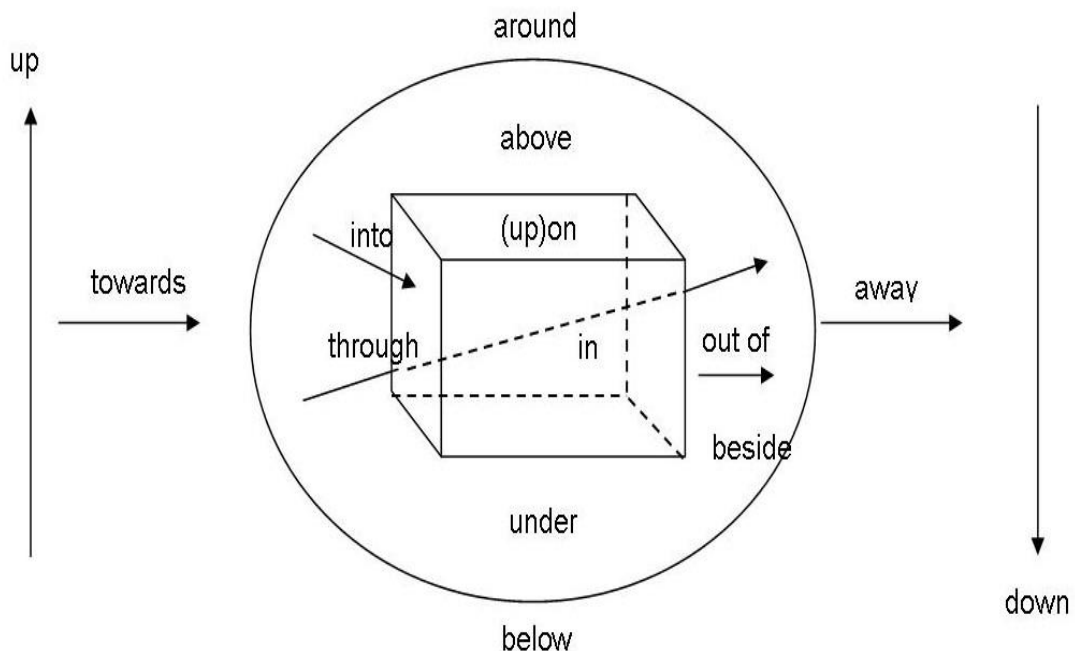
Try this little matching quiz. In the space beside each connective place a letter(s) ('a' - 'j') that describes that connective's function in a sentence. And then, add a number ('i' - 'vii') if that connective is found in the passage mentioned.

<u>Connective</u>	<u>Function of that Connective</u>	<u>Biblical examples (NIV)</u>
___ after	a. time/chronological	i. Rom 8:1
___ then	b. local/place	ii. Phil 1:9-10
___ therefore	c. reason	iii. Acts 2:14
___ but	d. result	iv. Matthew 8:1
___ as	e. purpose	v. John 8:31
___ indeed	f. contrast	vi. Heb3:12-14
___ otherwise	g. comparison	vii. Phil 3:1
___ for/because	h. series of facts	
___ so that	i. emphasis	
___ if	j. condition	
___ where		
___ however		
___ finally		
___ when		

List the key connectives in the text and begin to make some tentative observations about their function as a 'hinge' word in the passage. What parts of the passage do they join together? What would be lost if they were removed from the text? Jot down a few ideas . . .

(b) the prepositions - these are the directions in which a phrase/passage moves:

Prepositions play the critical role in many compact statements which are memorable. For example, 'if within us we find nothing over us, we succumb to what is around us'



Other prepositions: before, behind, with, after, for, like etc.

Or, consider John Stott's *Focus on Christ*, which he subtitled "a Theology of Prepositions".

1. *Through Christ - Our Mediator*
2. *On Christ - Our Foundation*
3. *In Christ- Our Lifegiver*
4. *Under Christ - Our Lord*
5. *With Christ - Our Secret*
6. *Unto Christ - Our Goal*
7. *For Christ - Our Lover*
8. *Like Christ - Our model*

Step Nine: Clarify what the 'ripe observation' for you and your sermon actually will be

I recognize it may just be me, but I have never reached this stage in the process without sensing the Holy Spirit quickening something within me. I have always found there to be (at least) one observation that, enflamed by the Spirit, lodges in my heart and gradually enlarges into the structure of a sermon. I have had sermons germinate on from many of the Steps in this process. And when that initial pivotal discovery is ours - the impact it has on our excitement and passion as we go to preach and teach is so significant.

Which is the observation I have made which is ripe for the picking?

What is the seed thought that will grow the structure of my sermon?

I find it important at this stage to pause and reflect, to stop adding to the mess and mass of observations, and to be quiet and still - take a break for a few hours or even overnight. The mists will clear. The fog will lift. Think about the setting into which you will be preaching. What is the appropriate word for them?

Is it a sequence of verbs? Is it a range of connectives? Is it the interplay of different people?

"The Spirit works through the whole range of human discourse – from carefully thought-out messages to entirely spontaneous discourse. In my experience, I have regularly had the sense of a message "coming together" with a speed and clarity that were not present until a fairly definable moment, after which it seemed that a sermon almost wrote itself. I have no reason not to attribute this consistent experience to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, I have seldom had such an experience until after I had spent a fair amount of time mulling over possible points, structures, sequences, illustrations, and applications, at times following almost a mechanical procedure of identifiable steps in sermon preparation. For me, at least it seems the Spirit works better when there is already something of value running around in my mind on which to build."

(Craig Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables* (Baker, 2004) 30-31)

Step Ten: Select a handful of key words to study further with a concordance

They may be from among the verbs, or one of the words that repeat, or a striking word that seems distinctive to you - but usually one that converges with your ripe observation in some way. Make a list below. 3-4 is plenty. But "no work is richer in pay than digging into a text with the spade of word study ... go to the text in search of word studies which will often suggest a metaphor that reminds you of a story." (Calvin Miller, *Preaching* (Baker, 2006) 136). Many of my most creative sparks come as I am reading some of the most technical stuff!

Please realise there is a science and art to completing good word studies. They are usually done poorly! The best advice I can give is to encourage you to make use of two powerful tools (these can be used with profit by those without knowledge of Greek or Hebrew)

+ For Old Testament Hebrew word study help

NIDOTTE: Willem A. VanGemeren (ed) *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Zondervan, 1997) 5 volumes and on CD

+ For New Testament Greek word study help

NIDNTT: Colin Brown (ed) *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1978) 3 volumes and on CD

Step Eleven: Summarize the thrust of the passage in one single sentence

This sentence matures into what Haddon Robinson calls the 'big idea'. Calvin Miller speaks of 'the thesis': "(that) short statement that expresses what you're going to talk about and what the sermon will call the reader to do about it" (Calvin Miller, *Preaching* Baker, 2006) 105). Others refer to it as the proposition. This is what keeps the sermon on track in preparation and delivery. It is "the thrust of the text as it relates to the listeners. Both phrases in the definition are crucial" (Greg Scharf, *Prepared to Preach* (Mentor, 2005) 127). It is "kindergarten in its clarity and Harvard in its force" (Miller, 107).

Always a great idea to test understanding - be it an essay, a doctoral dissertation, a Bible study for a small group - or even a sermon - *can I summarize what I am trying to say in a single sentence?*

"What makes the proposition so difficult to write are the high standards we have for this sentence ... it should be *memorable*, although never catchy at the expense of accuracy. Indeed it needs to be memorable enough that we can remember it and urge it upon people repeatedly without reference to notes. It must be *clear*. Clarity is aided by *conciseness* using as few words as will get the job done. This is not brevity at the expense of adequacy. It should be *comprehensive*, but not wordy ... It is *contemporary* and its wording reflects that ... A proposition that achieves these lofty but important goals will seldom emerge on your first attempt to write it ... The proposition is like the DNA of your sermon. If you state clearly for your listeners what the passage is saying to them and how they should respond, the balance of your message is just a matter of developing that idea in an orderly fashion patterned after how the text does that and driving it home in ways the text suggests." (Scharf, 127-128)

Step Twelve: Picture the 'prevailing image' and give it time to incubate in the imagination

We want our preaching to spark the imagination and do something within the 'theatre of the mind' of our listeners. Preaching can be so propositional and word-focused. We need to think in images. So here is a good opportunity to pause and identify the prevailing image which stays with you as you live in this passage. Listeners thrive on an image that can live on in the memory.

Is there an image you can use and to which you can return at various points in the sermon?

Step Thirteen: Develop that initial, tentative outline for what you want to say from the text

The structure of the sermon should emerge from breaking the proposition down into its constituent parts. What are the 2, 3, 4, or 5 things that I want to draw out from this passage/proposition?

This will come from mulling over all those appetizing discoveries which you have made and which now constitute the smorgasbord on lots of bits of paper. Pray! Reflect!

What are the key ideas that support your summary sentence? How does that ripe observation break into different bits? As you survey the observations that have been made to this point, a variety of points for a sermon begin to emerge. Initially, it may all be quite slow and 'everything goes a bit blank' - but with practise a sort of 'homiletical instinct' develops. Keep things in the present tense and include verbs that draw listeners 'actively' into the message.

Step Fourteen: Place each heading at the top of a different piece of paper

Take out some sheets of paper and put each separate (and tentative) idea for a heading/point at the top of a different piece of paper. Begin to work through your smorgasbord of observations and gather onto each piece of paper those thoughts and ideas and observations which support the heading at the top of the page. In other words put the savouries on one plate and the deserts on another! This process begins to fire the imagination as each separate page begins to suggest its own sequence of thought.

A rule of thumb: Don't consult others until you have your own tentative outline.

Step Fifteen: Consult the experts, the commentators !

Now is the time to ask interpretive questions. Now is the time to apply.

Now (*and only now!*), you are ready to raid the commentaries. You will be thrilled to discover them unpacking some of your precious insights. You will welcome them fine-tuning some of your more 'imaginative' ones. You will value their ability to fill in background and contextual information. You will feel much freer to use their insights with greater integrity, now that you have done so much of your own work in the text. Read and reflect – and add notes to your separate pages, thereby building your understanding of the passage as well as preparing your message.

Your fancy-free observations and initial interpretations will need this correcting and fine-tuning. It is arrogant to think that your discoveries are all you need when there are those who have gone before who have given years of their lives to studying the very book you are studying. Learn from them. Become a buyer of selective commentaries and use them.

A website that I have used a lot is: <http://www.denverseminary.edu/dj/>
and proceed to 'Annotated OT Bibliography' or 'New Testament Exegesis Bibliography'

the essential conviction

This exercise, diligently done with Spirit-sought illumination, will provide the smorgasbord from which you can have a good healthy feed - and go on to feed others. The raw material for your message lies in front of you.

What's more, to know something of the 'joy of truth discovery' *on your own with the Spirit of God* is to possess the critical key which opens the door to preaching the Word of God with passion and under deep conviction ...

... as well as being a key ingredient in developing and sustaining a faithful, fruitful preaching ministry which has some longevity about it.