



Organizing (Outlining) the Sermon1

By Jess Hall Jr.

A Kentucky mountaineer was renowned for his shooting prowess. All over the hills trees exhibited his marksmanship-bullet holes in the dead center of small white circles drawn on the tree. An admirer of his persistent precision asked how he was always able not only to hit the bull's-eye, but always able to hit it dead center. The sharpshooter replied, "I just shoot the tree and then draw the circle around it." Many a sermon has been organized in the same manner - "I just shoot at the hearers and then draw a circle around wherever it hits."

Like the mountaineer marksman, an unorganized sermon fires without aim or purpose and then draws a circle around whatever it hits. Even superior sermon content does not guarantee a good sermon; it takes proper organization to accomplish its purpose. It is the purpose of organization (the outline) to provide the best possible method of getting the thesis of the sermon to come alive in the minds of the hearers. Without proper organization, the sermon becomes at best a lecture. Biblical facts become blinders instead of lenses helping us to see the glory of God. People can starve to death while we read the list of ingredients on a loaf of bread!

Organization is the aspect of sermon preparation that is the real measure of the preacher's devotion to the duty of preaching. Sermon ideas fall like rain upon those who are students of God's Word, observers of God's world, and lovers of God's people. More material for each idea can be gathered in a short time than can be used in even a long sermon. It is then that the hardest work begins-organizing the sermon. Put differently, after the carpenter has gathered his materials, the time-consuming task of building begins. The materials can be thrown together without regard to plumb or square, and without aim or purpose, or they can be carefully assembled according to the blueprint to produce a beautiful edifice.

Proper organization keeps the preacher from being a slave to his notes. It is far easier to remember thoughts that are related in a logical and orderly fashion. If the preacher cannot remember what he wants to say long enough to say it, how can he expect his hearers to remember it longer than it takes to hear it?

Proper organization helps the sermon by bringing clarity to it. If the subject matter is unclear in the preacher's mind and disorganized in presentation, how can the preacher expect his hearers to get a clear understanding?

Proper organization helps the hearers to remember what has been said and to carry away the sermon's idea from which they derive sustenance for their souls and support in their struggles.

Lack of organization robs the preacher of credibility. "He is disorganized" is the preacher's kiss of death. His hearers have concluded that he is either unable to organize his thoughts or is too busy - or worse yet, too lazy-to do so. In the former case they are frustrated; in the latter case they are angry. In either case they have lost their willingness to listen.

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