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INCOHERENT PREACHING: THE REMEDY

By

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Some sermons are like this math problem: “ $4 \ 3 \ 2 \ 1 = x$ ”. What’s the answer? It could be “23” ($4 \times 3 \times 2 - 1$), or “24” ($4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1$), or “2” ($4 - 3 + 2 - 1$). To solve the problem, you need to know how the parts are connected. Otherwise, all you have are random numbers, or thoughts. In math, the connections are called signs; in preaching, they’re called transitions.

Transitions are like the couplers in a train. Our grandchildren and I play with model N Gauge trains in our basement. Couplers link the locomotive to the car behind it and then each car to the next one. If one (or several) of them breaks or is missing, the stranded people in passenger cars or the cattle in the box cars never move, at least not those beyond the defective coupler. The couplers don’t carry any cargo – it’s all in the cars. But they’re absolutely essential, and so are transitions, couplers in a train of thought.

Suppose, for example, you preached on “love” last Sunday. During your 30 minutes, you uttered 100 sentences, each one a true statement about love, but with no sentence connected to the one before or the one after it. Could the Lord use that message? Of course. A patient listener might easily have found one statement or another about “love” applicable to her life. But in the study of logic, the student learns that “true” statements do not necessarily make a “valid” argument. So your conglomeration of “true” affirmations may not have been “valid.” And your message would not have been coherent.

“Coherent” means “stuck together” (think of “co-here,” check the Latin), “logically connected,” as in “a coherent argument.” Synonyms include “rational, intelligible, lucid, logical, orderly, comprehensible, reasoned.” I used to ask students to prepare two written copies of a sermon. We would then sit at a table in my office, and I would read through the sermon until I was unable to comprehend the flow of thought, at which point I would ask the student to look at that passage and explain or correct the apparent lack of a sign, a coupler, a transition. Otherwise the material seemed “incoherent,” however “true” the individual thoughts may have been.

Perhaps some incoherent students became incoherent preachers. That would be a shame. Not that the Lord can’t apply their random thoughts to people’s lives. But minds and hearts and lives are not being challenged by the thought-provoking and heart-changing depths of what God has revealed of His own mind and heart.

How do you continue to be an incoherent preacher? Gather isolated information about your topic, or text, or theme. Put it somewhere, probably in some electronic storage system (computer, iphone, tablet). Push it around a little bit. Add some introduction. And a conclusion (which may be vaguely connected at least to the last part of the sermon). Never give a thought to what you may have heard in a class on preaching about a proposition and the need for transitions.

You may have difficulty recalling what you were taught about a proof in geometry: you begin with a proposition (to be proved, demonstrated), move through various lines (each one beginning with “therefore”), finally reaching the last line (which repeats the original statement) where you proudly enter “Q.E.D.” (“quod erat demonstrandum,” “what was to be demonstrated”). Coherent sermons resemble geometry arguments. In both experiences, being coherent is better than being incoherent.

How does a preacher work toward being coherent? Sometimes it’s easy, even automatic. For example, preaching through some narrative passages in the Bible reflects the logical flow of the story. That’s been the case in several sermons I’ve heard recently on The Good Samaritan, as they’ve moved from the lawyer’s misguided question (“Who is my neighbor? I surely don’t have to love Gentiles or Samaritans, do I?”) to Jesus’ reversal (“The important question is, ‘Are you a neighbor?’”). A sermon on The Prodigal Son should display the story’s simple and clear coherence. I am reminded of an outline that I saw many years ago: “I. Sick of Home, II. Homesick, III. Home.” Memorable. Coherent. But many sermon forms require special focus on coherence, which brings us back to “transitions.”

Transitions are like the signs in a math problem, the couplers in a train, and the “therefores” in a geometry proof. Transitions move your hearer from one paragraph (or subject or thought) to another. They are words or phrases that connect one idea to the next one. They are simply, “appropriate words used to connect ideas.” Why are they so important, even critical?

Transitions tie the parts of a sermon together; otherwise ideas seem disjointed, even random. They separate between thoughts and connect them, leading from one thought to another. They move across what’s called “the idea space.” Transitions make clear how your ideas cohere.

But transitions do more than connect; they also show movement. Like the lines in a geometry proof (“Therefore...”), they allow you to build your argument, smoothly, persuasively, so that minds and lives are affected and changed. Transitions show progress and direction. They move the listener from one idea to the next one. To whatever degree is needed, they summarize what you have just said and look forward to what you are going to say. Transitions show, “This is where we have been, and here is where we are going.”

Now suppose you can’t think of an appropriate transition. The problem may be that your paragraphs, thoughts or ideas are not clear, even to you; you may need to define them more

precisely. Or it may be that no transition works, because the points simply are not related to one another (*non sequiturs* do not cohere); you may need to interject a new point between them. Some preachers use transitions naturally and effectively. Others of us (the half below average) need to work at it.

Let's further suppose – just theoretically, of course – that you are in the one-half of all preachers who are less adept (or gifted) than average in coherent preaching. If there's no “coupler, transition” between the introduction and your first idea, or between your first thought and the second, your audience will tend to “tune out” – perhaps fumble with the bulletins or their phones, or think about a football game, or dinner or whatever; and their attention may never come back, at least not this Sunday. Their response to your continuing verbiage: “I am totally lost.” You don't want that to happen, especially if it's your fault. Using effective transitions keeps you and the congregation on track, on the train of thought. And you don't need to look far to find samples.

I found a website with 27 rows of charts (lists) of transitions, with nine charts on a line and perhaps 40 transitions on each chart. That's 9,720 transitions; with some duplication, maybe 5,000 different ways to make a connection between the next paragraph or idea or thought with the previous one.

For example, you may now move on to add new material (“Furthermore...”), make a comparison (“In a similar way...”) or show contrast (“On the other hand...”). You may want to emphasize your point (“Obviously...”), or show priority (“Primarily...”), or cause and effect (“As a result...”, “Of course...”), or exception (“Nevertheless...”, “in spite of...”). Perhaps you simply show progress or sequence in your train of thought (“First of all...”, “Last...”), or passage of time (Next...”), or move from general to specific (“For example...”). Transitions are appropriate if you are building an argument (“In addition...”) or proving your case (“Obviously...”). Sometimes they indicate repetition (“As I have said...”) or introduce an example (“To illustrate...”). Transitions are perhaps most obvious when they connect with the conclusion (“In conclusion...”, “Finally...” (*say this only at the conclusion, never before your last point*)). Such lists and examples are not very helpful. Why?

Remember that your congregation is a volunteer audience and most of them are not avidly noting each of your words. So simple transitions (for example, “Next, Moreover, Therefore”) often will not work. “First (don't say ‘firstly’), secondly, thirdly...” prompts the question, “‘Second’ of what?” Most brief transitions may be helpful in written composition, but your volunteer listener cannot go back mentally and review the last paragraph. He needs more help in making the connection. Secondly, the connection between your paragraph A and paragraph B may be close to unique, such that you need to look at the specific connection you intend and then to make that connection as clear as necessary for the hearer.

With some hesitation I offer some real life examples. Thirty years ago I preached a series of twelve sermons on the Book of Job. Recently I found typed transcriptions of the actual sermons, made from tapes by a faithful church secretary. In the first sermon I introduced the

Book and surveyed Chapter One. The first transition is, “So it is a book of considerable appeal. Let me say also that parts of it are familiar. At least if you go to a large number of funerals....” That paragraph ends with “A book of appeal, a book of familiarity.” The next paragraph begins with, “But it is a difficult book.” Further into the sermon, there is this transition, “So the paragraph at verse 1 begins, ‘There was man...’ and then describes Job and his family. But verse 6 begins, ‘There was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord and Satan also came among them.’”

I rarely feel impelled to say, “The sermon was too obvious” or “The message was too simple.” Perhaps more of us need to run that risk by developing transitions that move toward this kind of extreme: “I just told you ‘A’. Now I’m going to tell you ‘B’. And here is how they’re connected.” And later you recapitulate, allowing hearers to stay on track or get back on board: “I’ve told you ‘A’ and how ‘B’ follows from it. Now we’re going to see how ‘C’ is the result.” Help your congregation to know what you’ve covered, where you are now and where you’re going. Too simplistic? Maybe. Of course, you need variation in wording, and you can make it a bit, but not much, more sophisticated, more smooth. Run the risk of violating the oft-repeated maxim: “Transitions are best when they are least noticed.” It beats being incoherent.

PowerPoint is increasingly used in worship, but sometimes it remains idle during the sermon. Why not display your major points on the screen? Perhaps no more than a slide with “Point A”, then later one with “Point A” and “Point B” and so on. As people see the visual, you explain the journey from “Point A” to “Point B.” Avoid creating a “data dump” of material people cannot assimilate; a clutter of Bible verses, minor points, and extraneous details will lose the central flow. How helpful it might be for people to follow your train of thought, if you can visually show them, “We were just here (Point A); now we’re going here (Point B), and this is the connection.”

Congregations, especially perhaps younger members, may have underdeveloped or damaged listening skills. In his on-line article *Preacher’s Toolkit: How Can I Help my Congregation Listen to Sermons in a Culture of Distractions?*, Sebastian Kim identifies some of the causes, such as addictive technology, which can lead to a shorter attention span and even learning disabilities. But whatever an era’s or generation’s challenges, incoherence is always fatal in communication. No one can understand incoherence; it always fails. And the preacher has the remedy.

Transitions are couplers in the train of thought. They must be in place and function well. The goal is for the whole train to arrive at the station. Any improvement in their use moves any sermon on the continuum from “totally incoherent” to “fully coherent.”

