

Basics of Expository Preaching – December MTC

Group Study: 1 Thessalonians 1

- What was Paul preaching in Thessalonica? (1:5, 9-10)
- How did the Thessalonians receive this preaching? (1:3,6-10)
- What did that prove? (1:4)
- So, in light of the whole passage, what might “Power... Spirit... Conviction” (1:5) mean?

Plenary – noting:

- We want to preach the GOSPEL – not moralism or motivational hype – it is a gospel (let’s get specific here) all about Jesus, about his death that took the wrath of God, and about eternity (v10)¹
- We want the effect of our preaching to be:
 - Joy even in the midst of affliction (this is no prosperity gospel)
 - Faith that works itself out in practice
 - Turning from idols – false ideas about God – to the true God (something that even those from a ‘religious’ background need to do)
 - Longing for the return of the Lord Jesus
- Their turn to God proves that they had *already* been chosen by God (cf. John 15:16). Their repentance and faith and love and hope are all a gift and working of the Spirit of God in them.
- “Power... Spirit... Conviction” – are not about visible signs and wonders but about the great miracle of being able receive the gospel. The Spirit is not doing something separate to the preaching of the Word. He is the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of Life, the Spirit of Truth, working in and through the words he wrote, the words of eternal life, the gospel of Christ, driving it into people’s hearts, giving ears to hear it, giving new life by it.

Look at Acts 17:1-4

This is Thessalonica – another report on the same event Paul writes about in 1 Thess. 1.

What was going on? Paul is arguing from the Scriptures for the necessity and supremacy of Christ. No miracles reported, no-one falling over, no fire and wind, just the apparently weak, unimpressive act of pointing to Christ in the Scriptures – and that is the where the power is, that is where the Holy Spirit is working.

This MTC we will be looking at two things

1. Finding the Big Idea
2. Finding the Application

We’ll particularly be looking at **Gospel Narrative**

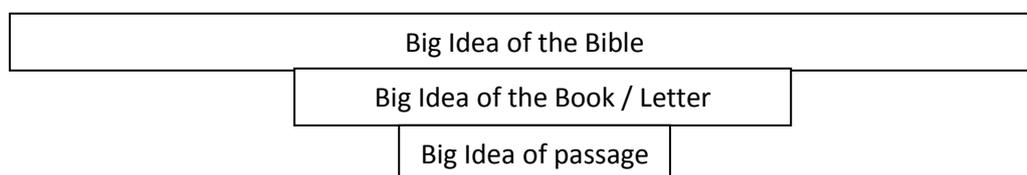
¹ Cf. Galatians 1 – the great danger of drifting away from this gospel of Jesus, sin, wrath, eternity to another gospel (e.g. “my transformation now”) which is really no gospel at all. We must keep preaching the gospel and not assuming it.

1. Finding the Big Idea

All good human communication is about something. It's the same in the Bible – a book or a letter or a part of a book or a letter is about something.

- E.g. the whole Bible – Luke 24:44-47 (we'll look at this more tomorrow morning with Sukesh Pabari)
- E.g. in Matthew – there are clear units - 5 teaching blocks carefully marked – and within them there may be other units like parables – often these parables begin, “The Kingdom of Heaven will be like...” – that is giving you the Big Idea
- E.g. Mark 1:1 – that's what Mark's book is all about.
- E.g. Luke 1:3 – an orderly account.²

So you can look at 'Big Idea' on lots of different levels. As you go down the levels you get more and more specific. But the smaller-scale level always fits within the bigger-scale one:



So your big idea for a passage is always going to have something to do with Jesus Christ crucified and risen but the smaller the passage the more specific the truth about Jesus. The Big Idea of Luke's Gospel could be something like “The God of Israel who comes to seek and save the lost”³ – and every passage contributes to that theme in some way.

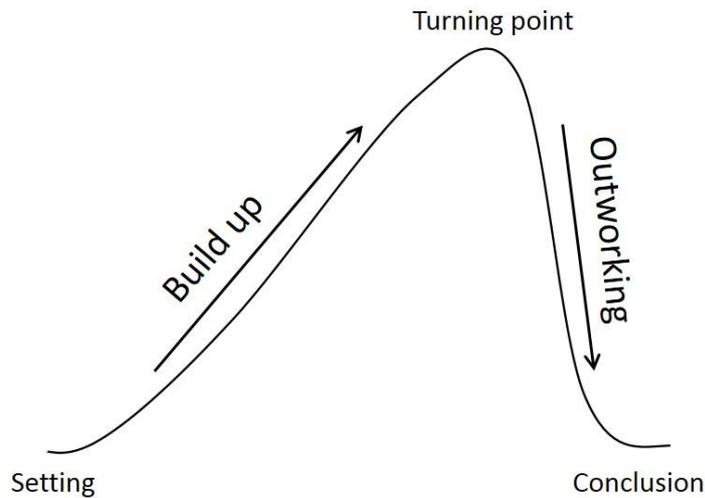
The value of trying to find the Big Idea:

- a) Going to be hard work. Will take hours. And that hard quarrying is good for us – it takes you very deep into the Word
- b) Going to keep us from majoring on the minors. It is possible to preach on the minor things in a passage which, while untrue, are not central. E.g. you could say from Luke 24 that it is good for Christians to meet on Sundays or it's good to do ministry two-by-two or it's ok to eat fish because Jesus did and miss the big point about the resurrection and how we know Jesus through the Word and preach him to the ends of the earth. There is a danger that we see something that reminds us of our favourite theme and off we go on that. If we work to find the big idea of each passage and preach that we will feel the full force of the Word and keep all things in their proper place.
- c) Going to help us communicate. Practically in Communication it is worth remembering that it is very difficult for listeners to remember more than one thing. Very true of children but true for all of us. And once you've got the One Thing you can then preach it for 5 minutes or 1 hour – depending on how much time you've got – but either way faithfully representing the whole message of the story.

² Plus, as we saw last MTC in Matthew – there are clear units - 5 teaching blocks carefully marked – and within them there may be other units like parables – often these parables begin, “The Kingdom of Heaven will be like...” – that is giving you the Big Idea; in the Prophets, “The Word (singular) of the Lord came to...” – it's a singular 'Word', 'burden', 'message', 'oracle', about something.

³ I'm sure you can come up with something better. More on the theme of Luke [here](#).

With Gospel stories/narrative, it's worth being aware that there is often a shape like this:⁴



E.g. the build-up of tension in Luke 8:40-56 or through the whole Gospel and particularly from Matt. 22 up to the climax of 23:44-47.

Very often **“the turning point is the teaching point”** (David Jackman)

How to find the Big Idea:

Basically just read, read, read again, pray, pray, pray

Ask lots of questions:

- Surprises? (the Bible should be constantly surprising – notice strange turns, omissions, unexpected statements, things that are assumed that we wouldn't have assumed)
- Setting – Where is this happening? (in Jerusalem or Galilee or where?) Where are we in the story of the Bible and the book? Remember CONTEXT. What is significant in the verses surrounding your passage?
 - E.g. Matt 11-12 (rejection) → Matt 13 (parable of rejection)
 - E.g. groups of miracles (Mark 4:35-5:43 and parallels) or groups of parables all making roughly the same point (Matt. 24-25)
 - E.g. Contrasts – Luke 18:9-30; 22:54-71
 - E.g. Location – e.g. Jerusalem – Luke 9:51; 13:34; 18:31; 19:41-44
 - E.g. Sandwiches – e.g. Mark 3:20-35; 5:21-43; 11:12-25; 14:1-11
- Plot - What is basically going on? Can you divide the story into parts? Can do that in a number of ways. E.g. John 3 could be broken down by:
 - Content – New birth / belief
 - Location – Jerusalem / Judea
 - Time – at feast /after
 - Actors/speakers – Nic & Jesus / John & disciples
 - Repeated phrase – truly, truly / whoever... eternal life
 - Logic – For – v16

⁴ This is slightly different to the more balanced bell shape of OT narrative. I think in the Gospels you tend to get the decisive turning point very close to the conclusion. This is often the way modern novels and films work too.

Then ask: What is going on in each part? How does the mood change through the story? (look at the emotions, feel the story) How does the pace change? (Often it will slow down for key moments – e.g. the Cross) Can you see the shape of the story? **What is the moment of highest tension, the turning point?**

- Characters - Who is involved? Why are they there? What are the relationships between them? What are they like? What are the contrasts between them? (e.g. Luke 23:39-42) Do they change? (e.g. Luke 19:1-10)
- Dialogue – What are the important things that are said? (e.g. in Mark’s Gospel we start with “the Son of God” (1:1) but we have to wait until 15:39 to hear that phrase again, interestingly from the lips of a Gentile and crucially at the moment of death, “this man was the Son of God” – he is the Son of God as he hangs on the Cross); in Luke the poems and speeches in chapter 1-4 are crucial in setting the scene and the themes for the whole Gospel.
- Narrator – What are the repeated words and ideas? (e.g. in Luke 24 – Scriptures and Word) Does the narrator add anything that helps us see what is important? (e.g. Luke 3:23-38 – showing Jesus to be another Adam, Son of God)
- Is there a key verse?
- What is this story all about? What is the Big Idea?

Guidelines for a Big Idea:

- a) Not too short – “God is good” could come from anywhere in the Bible – it needs to be specific to the passage in question – what is it that sums up *this* passage in particular.
- b) Not too long – if it becomes a very long sentence then you lose the sharpness – keep it as short and punchy as possible.
- c) **Think Jesus** – ABOVE ALL – remember that the big idea of the whole Bible story and particularly of the Gospels is Jesus (Mark 1:1) – so the big idea of the story will have something to do with him. If your Big Idea is all about man or about ‘faith’ then keep working until it is about the beauty of Christ. The big question is: How do I know Christ better because of this text?

Be Christ-centred

Group Exercise: Finding the BIG IDEA Luke 9:28-36

- Pray for the Spirit’s help as you think over his Word then read Luke 9:21-62
- What are some of the themes you see here?
- Read Luke 9:28-36 again
 - What are the surprises?
 - What is important in the context?
 - What is the shape of the story – where is the climax?
 - Who are the characters and why are they there?
 - What important things do the character say?
 - What is the narrator emphasising?
 - Is there a key verse?
- Write down the Big Idea in a simple sentence
- Check that the Big Idea is Christ-centred

2. Finding the Application

Group Discussion:

Read Luke 8:40-48 – how have we heard this preached and applied?

- Plenary (5 minutes) – collecting the different approaches. Don't need to interact with them at this stage but listen carefully and use them as examples through the session.

1. Application we don't want:

- a) Random – the classic applications bolted on to any sermon when we can't think of anything else: Trust God, pray more, read the Bible more, witness more, give more, recommit your life to Christ... Instead we want application that flows naturally from the text.
- b) Superficial – this means seeing something that looks like a promise or command or warning and jumping on it and applying it to us (e.g. Luke 18:22 – while the point of the story is precisely that you *can't* get into the kingdom by obeying commands).
- c) Allegorising – treating history as parable – e.g. in Luke 9:12-17 – the bread is 'the little we have' which God will multiply; or Luke 19:29-35 – we are the donkey and need to be loosed and then we carry Jesus.
 - a. Personalising – forgetting that this is history and jumping into the shoes of the Bible characters – there is a sense in which we are to see ourselves in the people who encounter Jesus and there is a sense in which we are to follow Jesus and become like him, but the disciples are generally pretty useless (e.g. Luke 22:45,54-62) and when it comes to Jesus – he is first and foremost our substitute and *then* he is our example – he dies for Peter and *then* Peter will die for him (cf. Luke 22:33-34).
- d) Moralising – this is the massive curse – we see something bad in the story and we say, "Don't do that" and we see something good and we say, "Do that". When you read through the Gospels (and the whole OT) you find you can't do that – all our 'heroes' are deeply compromised sinners from birth to death. We should be quicker to identify with their weakness than their strength.

Even when we do a good job of handling the text there is a great danger in our move to application that we move from grace to works: e.g. Big Idea: Jesus Saves to the Utmost; Application: Now we need to do our bit. The gospel goes out the window and we turn back to Law.
- e) Principlising – this is trying to find a 'value' or a 'principle' or a 'procedure' in the story to apply – e.g. from Luke 8:4-8 – sow a seed (anything) and reap 100-fold (ignoring what the seed is here and that it is a parable about Jesus' own ministry); or Matthew 9:27-31 – if you really believe Jesus is able to do a particular miracle for you then he will do it (but this is history, Jesus walking around on earth and showing he is the Messiah (cf. Matt. 11:5) and would we apply the emphasis on the private nature of the miracle (v28 – in the house) and the command not to testify about it (v30)?) . The Bible doesn't really do principles (stripped of context and disconnected from Christ) – it does stories.

2. Applying narrative, parable and teaching

A) NARRATIVE – this is the majority of the Gospels and the majority of the OT

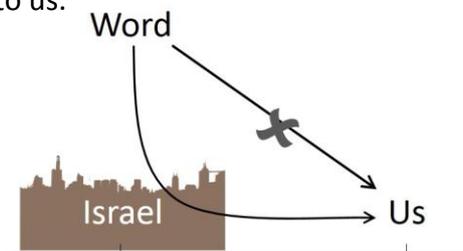
Slow down and go back

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Don't rush to the superficial application

Don't rush to jump into the shoes of the Bible characters

- a) History not parable – most of the problem comes from forgetting that these were real people living to whom these things really happened in a past time. They are not me. These are not parables or allegories or How-To's for us to copy. The Gospels (and the whole OT) is the honest, unvarnished account of sinners interacting with one another and with God. It can really help in preaching from the Gospels to set the scene and say, "Imagine, this *really* happened, Jesus stopped a funeral and told a corpse to get up and it really did! Imagine!"
- b) God speaks to us through what he did in history – the Word/Christ went first to the lost sheep of Israel (Matt. 15:24) - then, through listening to what was said to them in their context, we hear him speak to us.



In our arrogance we demand a personal message from God but actually God has given us something far more wonderful.

Read John 20:26-31 – Thomas saw the risen Jesus in the flesh, could reach out and touch him literally. But Jesus says the really blessed people are us – those who read John's book. As we read the miracles and works of Jesus we encounter the living God-man just as powerfully – in fact more powerfully – even than Thomas did – we encounter him and can have life in him.

- c) The context gives the cutting edge – it is as we take the time to go back to Israel 2000 years ago and take time to find exactly what was going on then; it is as we take the time to look at the context of our passage in the Gospel – that is where we find the cutting edge for our message – how it should apply to us.

Group study: Luke 8

Read Luke 8:22-56

- What is Jesus dealing with in each story?
- What similarities are there between the outcomes of these stories?
- What is Luke doing by putting all these stories together?
- So how does the context help us to see the importance and application of Luke 8:42-48?

B) PARABLES – look for the twist (the 'sting in the tale') – ask: What is the surprising truth about **Jesus**?

Who is the Sower whose word is largely rejected? (Luke 8) Who is the Good Samaritan who picks up the fallen man? (Luke 10) Who is the Father who bears the humiliation and disgrace of the prodigal? (Luke 15)

C) TEACHING

- look at who it is addressed to and why
- see the teaching in the light of the whole Gospel and esp. the Cross
- make sure you are teaching gospel not law – e.g. the Sermon on the Mount is designed to make us long for that perfect life and crawl to Christ as those who cannot do it for him to give us his perfect life and identity as son of God

3. Remember where you are in the Big Story - the Bible Timeline is crucial in applying rightly. As we have been thinking about in the Biblical Theology sessions with Paul Sampson – we are in a bigger story – and that bigger story is all centred on the Cross.

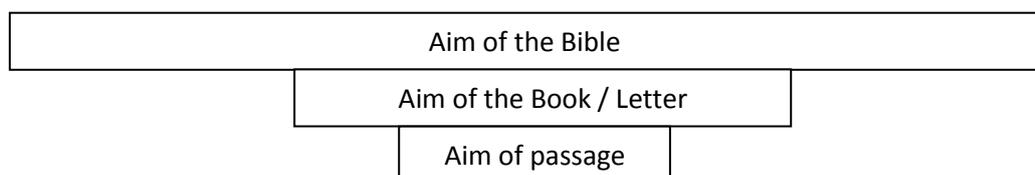
- How does the passage fit into the big story of Creation to New Creation? Where is the passage on the line?

When it comes to the Gospels it's interesting because we're right on the cusp of the OT and NT. We're in very unusual times – the last OT prophet, the incarnation, a time of miracles and salvation and seismic shifts. And when we look at the timeline we see that the relevance of the Gospel accounts (the life, death and resurrection of Jesus) is largely a narrative/historical relevance. In a similar way to the 2nd World War is relevant to a 21st century British person. As he reads about the 2nd World War and the sacrifices of the hundreds of thousands who died in France, he is not thinking "I am that man on the Normandy beaches facing the machine guns", he's thinking, "I'm glad that wasn't me. I'm very grateful those guys did that so that we weren't invaded by Nazi Germany, so we don't live now under a totalitarian regime. I am free because they died."⁵ That's the main relevance. It's a *historical* relevance.



4. How to apply (in a nutshell) – let the Gospel (and the Bible as a whole) tell you how it should be applied:

- The big aim of all the Scriptures is to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15).
- The Big Idea of every Gospel and every passage in the gospel will have something to do with Jesus and the right Application will be to apply him to the souls of sinners for their salvation.
- We want to find the Big Idea and Apply that – or to put it another way – we want to find Christ in the text and apply Him. John Wesley used to put in his diary, "Preached at ____, offered them Christ."
- So it's very like the diagram we looked at earlier of the different levels of Big Idea. The smaller-scale level always fits within the bigger-scale one:



⁵ You could make a similar illustration along the lines of the Kenyan fight for independence.

- Matthew’s big application is “Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden” (Matt. 11:28); “Everything is ready, come to the wedding feast” (Matt. 22:4) – we are not to be those who preach like the Pharisees (Matt. 23:4, 13)
- Luke’s big application is “That you may have certainty” (Luke 1:4), particularly certainty about our salvation as lost sinners (cf. Luke 7:47; 19:10)
- John’s big application is “That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31)
- E.g. the feeding of the 5000 is not a call to ‘give the little we have’ but a call to realise that we have nothing and can do nothing and to see that Jesus is giving himself for us as the living bread.
- **Jesus is FIRST our SUBSTITUTE and THEN our EXAMPLE**
 - E.g. Luke 4:1-13 – Jesus is the second Adam, the perfect Israel, who succeeds and maintains his righteousness where Adam and Israel fell to temptation and failed
 - E.g. Luke 22:33-34,39-46,54-62 – Peter will one day die for Jesus but first he is the sleeping one and the denier while Jesus goes to die for him and the drink the cup of God’s wrath instead of him
 - C.f. John 13 – first Jesus must wash the disciples’ feet, then they will wash one another’s feet
- In a nutshell – find the Big Idea about Christ and apply Him
 - Big Idea = Christ-centred
 - Application = Gospel-centred

Group exercise: Finding the APPLICATION

Read Luke 18:18-30 (the rich ruler)

- How does the context (v9-17 and v31-43) help us see the point of v18-30?
- How do these verses fit in with the main themes and point of Luke’s Gospel?
- How could you potentially preach this passage (v18-30) in a un-gospel way?
- What is the real main aim / application of this passage?