

Spectacle Frames and Skeletal Outlines

We had a great Study Morning with the Students at Wycliffe Hall last week. NT tutor Justin Hardin, Doctrine Tutor Benno Van DenToren and I to bring our integrated thinking to apply academic learning, spiritual formation and ministerial training from 1 Peter. My job was to do a “walk through” sermon from first read of the text to final form.

Sometimes I detect a little impatience when we discuss matters of structure and homiletical form. Surely we need to get on with the task of preaching the message of the bible and spend less time on homiletics?

But I have become increasingly convinced that form and content belong together. The skeleton of the sermon should not be protruding the flesh, but without any bones and support structure the body is formless and lifeless.

As I have mentioned elsewhere (see www.Simonvibert.com) Spurgeon was a master at the art of structuring and simplifying skeleton sermon outlines, producing over 12,000 of them, still in print. I have always felt that John Stott is brilliant at this task, always leaving me with a sense that his sermon has said all that needs to be said about the passage, helping me see it with a new clarity.

To illustrate: I am not very good at looking after my glasses. When they are well cared for and not scratched I hardly notice that I am wearing them. However, at the moment, I have bent one arm and scratched the right lens. The consequence of this clumsiness is that rather than seeing through the lens I am forever noticing the scratch. And rather than having clear focus on objects in front of me I have very aware that I need to wiggle the arm around to get a clear view.

A similar clumsiness at the stage of sermon construction can mean that the congregation is distracted from the content of the biblical passage by the lack of focus in the sermon outline. Instead of seeing the passage clearly, the structure distracts.

If the preacher states: “Rejoice despite trials” (1 Peter 1:6-7) the well educated congregation knows this to be true but fails to connect this with the specific flow of Peter’s thought.

If, on the other hand the preacher says: “Welcome trials and testing because like gold, your faith is precious. God will allow faith to be tested through suffering to make it pure.”

This task of pressing for clarity in the homiletical outline is a gift to the congregation. It enables them to concentrate on how the ancient bible passage applies to contemporary life. Good preachers structure sermons in such a way that the framework supports the bible message and enable congregations to focus their gaze on the God who speaks through his living Word.