



SIMPLIFY
the message

MULTIPLY
the impact

Talbot Davis

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Chapter One

From Clutter to Clarity

The Power of the One Point Sermon

DESIGNING A ONE POINT SERMON

As if the kind of enduring impact of the *forgiveness is learned so teach it well* message isn't enough of a reason to prompt you to join the ranks of the "one pointers," here's another one: you'll never have to think of a sermon outline again. Never.

I say that because most one point sermons follow mostly the same pattern (though in the section on **Openings and Closings** in Chapter Four I will discuss some of the nuance and variety possible within the one point design) with essentially the same movement. And I organize my one point sermons around three distinct movements:

Engage

Encounter

Empower

Yes, there are three of them, and yes, they alliterate, but no, the people of the church are not aware what is happening, nor will they fill in the blanks on an outline letting them know which "movement" they are currently experiencing. But I have found *engage, encounter,*

empower an *enormously* helpful construct to design a sermon from the listener's perspective rather than the speaker's. Here's what I mean.

Engage

Engage takes place, as you might expect, in the opening moments of the message. Through anecdote and observation, the pastor ensures that the people of the church are engaged in the subject at hand. Sermon openings are so critical because in these early moments people will decide whether you are likeable and interesting or unlikeable and boring. No pressure! I would estimate that 60 percent of the time, my *engage* section opens with something that I have either experienced or observed. I insert my own journey into the message early on so that the congregation will know I am taking an adventure with them, not delivering a lecture to them. The real engagement happens when I say something like, "...and I bet I'm not the only one. Some of you are going through the same thing. Some of you are wrestling with the same questions. Someone here didn't want to be here and now, suddenly, you know EXACTLY why God brought you here." The "someone here" moments ensure that the *engagement* is near universal in the room.

Two quick notes about the time to *engage*. First, if you tell a personal story, make sure you are not the hero of that story. Few things are more off-putting in preachers than a preacher who is the star of his or her own show. These opening moments need to reveal you as either an observer or a pilgrim or both. Second, there are many times in which the scripture itself is engaging enough. For example, in the message (and book) called *The Storm Before the Calm* I opened by reading the story of drunk, naked Noah in Genesis 9:18-29, put my Bible down, and said simply, "Well, THAT didn't make it into any illustrated children's Bible I ever saw." People were engaged—in part because most of them did not know that story *and* in part because

they were wondering, “How is that preacher going to get out of that mess?” *Engage*.

Encounter

Once everyone is with you on the adventure, it's time to *encounter*: a congregational deep dive into the scripture. In this movement, the effective preacher will not tell the church ABOUT a text; he or she will give the congregation an experience OF the text...an encounter INSIDE the text. You will help people encounter the passage when you are honest with your doubts about it, when you are playful with scripture's oddities (see drunk, naked Noah above), and when you are convinced that the difficult work of making sense of it and then applying it to life actually have eternal consequences.

When I work with some of my teammates at Good Shepherd on their sermon deliveries, I remind them that the time of digging into the Bible together needs to be a *high energy* moment in the sermon, not a Sunday morning obligation before you can get to your good stuff of application and illustration. The congregation needs to see the *joy of discovery* (more in Chapter Three) that you bring to your encounter with the inspired word.

For the vast majority of my sermons, the *encounter* leads to the unveiling of the *bottom line*, a term you will see throughout this book.

Empower

After the church has engaged and has had a scriptural encounter, the final movement is to *empower* the people. For some, that journey into the scripture was full of serenity; for others, it was deeply unsettling. For all, it will lead to points of application. And here is where the beauty of the one point sermon is most apparent: the preacher doesn't have to think of multiple points; he or she instead takes the ONE POINT and directs it to people at different life stages. “For

some single adults here, this means . . .” “For those of you who aren’t sure about Jesus yet, I’d recommend . . .” “For moms and dads here today . . .” “Students, here’s how this works with you . . .”

The bulk of the sermon will apply that bottom line to the different life stages and personal situations of people in the room; the bottom line itself functions as a REFRAIN marking the transition to the next thought while also imprinting itself on hearers’ brains. There’s a reason you remember the chorus of songs better than the verses, after all. This concluding movement of the message will be full of conviction or hope . . . or both. You will be clear that you are not the source of empowerment that will make subsequent life change possible, but you must convey your assurance that the Holy Spirit can take your words—mere vocal vibrations!—and do something of everlasting significance with them.

And they’ll know that you have been on the adventure with them, not standing apart from them. They will be able to tell that you yourself have been *empowered* through the process of preparation and delivery. By crafting an encounter with the scripture, you have also designed an experience with the congregation. That shared adventure makes all the difference.

Yet in my own thinking and designing, I make use of a metaphor that I have found especially helpful: the parking lot shuttles you find at major American theme parks. Consider the following scenario. You drive your family (reluctantly) into the mammoth lot at Orlando’s Disney World. After locating a parking spot, you move to the shuttle stop. At just the right time, the shuttle arrives, picks you and yours up, and then travels to the next stop where it picks up the next three or four carloads. At each stop, passengers *get engaged*. Eventually, after gathering all the passengers it can, the shuttle takes you to the entrance of the park itself. That’s where the folks (poor folks or lucky folks depending on your perspective) *encounter* all the rides in the park. At the conclusion of each ride, they’re

empowered—sometimes shaking with delight and eager for the next ride, or perhaps they are overcome with relief that they’ve finally ridden that coaster. Engage, Encounter, Empower.

As a point of reference, Andy Stanley in his *Communicating for a Change* describes the structure of one point sermons as “ME WE GOD YOU WE,” but the effect is the same. . . the first part of the sermon is meant to engage, the God section to encounter, the last part consists of congregational empowerment.

Here’s how it happened in the opening sermon of 2018 at Good Shepherd Church. We began the year with a series called *Practicing the Presence*, a five-week conversation around prayer, solitude, and being strange enough people that we talk to God all day long. The first message in that series was “The Best Part of Waking Up” and it came from a collection of psalms that shares a remarkably similar theme centered on time **in the morning** with God—Psalm 5, 57, 59, 90, and 143.

I began the message by describing a high-pressure tryout camp for a national tennis team that I attended when I was seventeen. My roommate during that week was eighteen and considerably more worldly and experienced than I (I was voted Third Most Innocent in my high school class, which we all knew was simply code for Third Biggest Loser). Anyway, this roommate would greet the alarm clock each morning with a slew of profanity. Word combinations and choices that I didn’t even know existed. I shared this incident with the congregation while sparing the specifics of my roommate’s language!

Then I moved quickly to acknowledge that my roommate from so long ago is likely not the only person to greet the day in that manner. *Perhaps some of you gathered here do the same thing. Or, if not the language, at least the emotion. . . that is, until you get your first cup of morning brew.* I then observed how in the twenty-first century we have one other element to our morning routines: many people begin

their days by digging into their devices. All in all, it was a sobering and accurate ENGAGE moment. Everybody was engaged because every person has a morning routine.

From there I took the people into the Psalms under consideration, reading not only the “morning” references early in each psalm but also the hopeful way each one concludes. My exegetical work suggested that there had to be a connection between the morning prayer and the evening peace. Collectively, we discovered that seemingly disconnected psalms have a remarkably common thread. We *encountered* the thread together. So in the process of note taking, praying, and scribbling, I came up with this bottom line: **WHERE you start the day determines HOW you finish it.**

If you start the day reactively, in your device, you’ll conclude it chaotically. Yet if you start the day in silence, in solitude, and in the Word, you’ll finish it with serenity. From there I moved to an invitation to give the #First15 minutes of each day to God and at the end of the service our church provided daily devotion guides to equip people to enact the very things I had spoken about. **WHERE you start the day determines HOW you finish it.** After *engagement* and *encounter* my hope and prayer was that the people of the church would *emerge* as a holy club of #First15ers. At the conclusion of the service, we provided a hands-on Daily Prayer Guide that empowered them to do just that.

On Monday, a Good Shepherd friend sent me a photo. Her eleven-year-old daughter had taken a piece of paper, written the bottom line on it, and placed that paper on top of her mom’s smartphone. It was the daughter’s reminder to mom NOT to begin the day on the phone and in the world, but in the Word. Eleven years old! Again, I promise you: no eleven-year-old ever wrote down my four alliterative points to convey biblical truth to her mother. If you want sermons that simplify the message to multiply the impact, so

that even eleven-year-olds hear and respond, then the one point design is for you.

WHAT EXACTLY DO THESE BOTTOM LINES LOOK AND SOUND LIKE?

In my sermon work, I place my bottom lines into one of three categories, which I describe below:

Declarative

I'd estimate that 65 percent of my messages land at a “declarative” bottom line. By declarative I mean a simple (but not simplistic) summary statement that is faithful to the scripture, applicable to life, and memorable to the brain. Here are some examples:

From a sermon based on John 4 where Jesus has his interaction with the woman at the well: **Jesus exposes who you are so you will discover who he is.**

From a message drawing on Elijah's “death wish” prayer in 1 Kings 19 and the delicate yet empowering way the messenger feeds him: **God won't do for you what he needs to do with you.**

During a series called *Royal Pains*, I developed a message called “The However Kings”—those leaders like Jotham who were *basically* good; *however* (a word the texts use repeatedly), they failed to remove the high places. That failure led to this bottom line: **What you tolerate today will dominate you tomorrow.**

For the *Solutionists* sermon series (and the resulting *Solve* book), I looked at Nehemiah's legacy in terms of the workers he empowered rather than the wall he built: **Leaving your mark isn't about what you accomplish. It's about who you influence.**

Finally, the *Practicing the Presence* series featured a sermon from Psalm 55 called “TOs and THROUGHs.” The adventure of that

psalm and the betrayal that hovers over it led to this bottom line: **To get TO trust you have go THROUGH trauma.**

Imperative

A second type of bottom line focuses more on exhortation and less on observation. These often take the form of a command—though a command I hope and pray I deliver with love and not with condescension. Here are three examples.

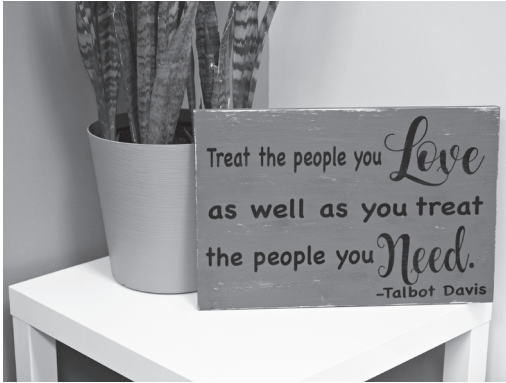
During *Solutionists*, we not only looked at how Nehemiah built a wall and influenced people but we also explored how he solved a famine. The takeaway? **Move on what you're moved by.**

As the concluding sermon of the *Crash Test Dummies* series (and final chapter of the book of the same name) we journeyed through Samson's story, being careful to separate the Samson of folklore from the Samson of scripture. His sad tale and bloody demise landed here: **Surrender your impulses so you don't surrender to them.**

Our *One-Sixty-Seven* series dwelt on the sources of wisdom and insight to which we open ourselves during the 167 hours a week we're NOT in church. One of the messages in that series was called "You Give Love a Bad Name" (thanks, Bon Jovi!) and resulted in this one point: **You'll give love a good name when your desires yield to his design.**

During a 2017 series called *Love Handles: Getting a Grip on Your Closest Relationships*, I delivered a message called "What Goes On Behind Closed Doors." After contrasting the level of kindness most of us have with people *beyond* our front doors with the type of cruelty many of us reserve for those who live *behind* our front door, I landed at this bottom line: **Treat the people you LOVE as well as you treat the people you NEED.** On Super Bowl Sunday in 2018, a Good Shepherd staffer attended a game-watching party at the home

of a family from the congregation. She sent me this photo via text message:



The family had found that particular bottom line memorable enough to design and mount on their kitchen wall as a household motto. The power of clarity...and the force of an imperative bottom line.

Inquisitive

I have found it highly effective to offer a question—specific, lingering, even painful—as the recurring bottom line. I suspect that “inquisitive” bottom lines make up about 10 percent of my sermons. Here are a few of the strongest.

As the concluding message of a series (and subsequent book) called *The Storm Before the Calm*, I dwelt on drunk, naked Noah in a message titled “After the Storm.” After examining the mess Noah left for his sons to deal with, I asked simply, **Who cleans up after you?**

During our *4U* series, I picked up that memorably phrased question from Romans 8 and riffed on it throughout: **If God is for us, who can be against us?**

One of the messages in the *One-Sixty-Seven* series dealt specifically with cell phone use and addiction. The sermon landed with this plaintive question: **Why be captive of the urgent when you can be captured by the ultimate?**

Chapter One

These, then, are the kinds of *bottom lines* you can use to design and deliver the kind of sermons that people from across the country remember five years later, *and* that eleven-year-olds from across the street use to preach to their own mothers: *Declarative, Imperative, and Inquisitive.*

You may well be wondering at this stage: How can I do the kind of biblical study required to distill a dense passage of scripture into a single compelling point? How can my time spent in exegesis result in a moment of discovery that I can joyfully share with the congregation? We will turn our attention to those and other matters in the next chapter.

A PREACHER'S RESOURCE FOR BUILDING SERMON SKILL

Simplify the Message: Multiply the Impact gives busy preachers the chance to build new skills. Talbot Davis writes as a preacher for his peers, offering simple and smart methods for writing and delivering great sermons. He instructs the reader on practical topics like writing techniques to hold the congregation's attention, preaching without notes, preaching in series, a new approach to exegesis, and preaching a one point sermon. Longtime preachers and seminarians alike will turn to this accessible (and even entertaining!) resource often.

"Very little cuts to the heart of a pastor more than preaching and how it is received by the hearers. Talbot Davis helps us in ways that are not only unforgettable but beneficial for people's apprenticeship with Jesus."

—**JORGE ACEVEDO**, lead pastor, Grace Church, a multi-site United Methodist congregation

"Talbot Davis is a pastor's pastor! This book offers heartfelt wisdom and practical suggestions for every stage of sermon preparation and preaching. Davis provides homiletical gems mined from his own ministry experience, deep love of scripture, and passion for the church."

—**JONI SANCKEN**, associate professor of homiletics, United Theological Seminary, Dayton, OH

"Great communicators know the hearts of their audience and have excellent tools to speak to them. Let Talbot Davis push you, challenge you, and offer you a most powerful tool—the one point sermon."

—**JIM COWART**, senior pastor, Harvest Church, Warner Robins, GA

"So much more than a clever approach to human memory, *Simplify the Message* is the insight-filled memoir of a seasoned communicator. Talbot's preaching combines hard work, intentionality, enthusiasm, and talent. I should know; I listen to him every week!"

—**TIM LANIAK**, professor of biblical studies, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Charlotte, NC

"Talbot Davis is a master at focusing us on what is most important, both in the Word and in the preaching of it. If you want your preaching to improve, let Talbot coach you. Your messages will go from interesting to influential."

—**CAROLYN MOORE**, lead pastor, Mosaic Church, Evans, GA

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