

# Homiletical Helps: Introduction and Conclusion

By Leroy A. Dobberstein

Time! Find me more time! Write an article for the *Quarterly* which will add minutes to my day, hours to my week. Find me time to do everything which needs to be done, at least more time for my sermon preparation.

This article cannot uncover any time which you do not already know about and have at your disposal. In fact, if anything, it is going to make demands on your time, on your sermon preparation. It addresses itself to the time you spend on those few paragraphs of each sermon which may not seem crucial and yet are very important. They are not vital to the explanation of your sacred text. They serve no purpose during the text study, text analysis, outlining and writing of the exposition, appropriation and application of your sermon. But they are of no little importance for preaching, communicating the gospel, sharing your message with God's people. They are the introduction and conclusion of your sermon.

After spending many hours of prime time, beginning with text study and including the writing of the sermon, introduction and conclusion deserve a few extra minutes if they are to serve their intended purpose. Introduction and conclusion, not done well, can become extra baggage, an obstacle, a distraction. If so, a sermon would be better without them. Done right they will provide a stimulating beginning and a stirring finishing touch to make a good sermon even better.

An introduction is vital to a good sermon for rhetorical and psychological reasons. To avoid an abrupt beginning and to gain the good will and interest of the listener, no sermon should be without an introduction. We may take it for granted that we have the good will of most, if not all, of those who sit in the pew. The very reading of the text serves to create interest. Yet, to get from text to theme and to focus the interest of our hearers the introduction is a virtual necessity. Having said that, we will want to seek the choicest characteristics of any introduction and avoid all the faults that can easily spoil a sermon before we have hardly begun. The do's and don'ts which follow can be found at length in *Preach the Gospel*, the homiletics book written by Professor Richard Balge and Pastor Joel Gerlach and used as a textbook at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

An introduction ought to be purposeful and preparatory. It should lead from the text to the theme by the most direct route. Along this brief path it should inform the hearer why the message you have prepared is useful and necessary for him. For this reason the introduction must not begin too far afield, be remote to the subject, get ahead into the body of the sermon or digress anywhere along the way. When you are giving directions to a traveler seeking his way, you will be as brief and clear as possible. You will not mention every street, house, landmark along the way. You will mention only what is most outstanding and necessary to enable him to find his way.

Applying this to the introduction, keep it short and simple. Say enough, but no more than necessary, to cross the bridge to your theme and parts. Remember, this is only an introduction to your sermon. It is not to be a guided tour. It is not the place to appropriate and apply the thoughts of your text, much less a time to share the thoughts of your study for the preparation of the sermon. To use a common analogy, the introduction is the entrance, the sermon proper the mansion itself. The entrance to any building gives a definite impression. Therefore it deserves your best effort. But it is not the destination. Therefore keep it short and simple.

Short and simple applies especially to the opening words of the introduction. No words are going to be more important in any address except for the closing statement in the conclusion. The very reading of your text should already have aroused interest. We do not want to lose this interest with a lengthy, abstract, obvious or purposeless opening sentence. Write out the opening statement carefully. Listen to it. Does it make a person want to hear more or does it seem as if it were written for someone else, for some other occasion.

This leads to another point. Make it friendly and personal. You are speaking to God's people. It is your great privilege to stand in God's place and address his children. Do not keep this privilege a well-guarded secret. Let them know by your friendly and personal manner what a privilege it is. Involve them in your message from the beginning. By the use of the second person and by questions and statements which call for thoughts and opinions make the hearer feel that this message was written for him or her personally. Necessarily,

the introduction is no time to be polemical, to be pessimistic and negative or to address oneself to those who have failed to come to the worship service.

Ideas for the introduction may come from the text itself: some person, place, circumstance. They may come from the theme, the truth it proclaims, its importance for the hearer. Theme and text do not make the best source, however. Better is an introduction from the church year. Though not the easiest to make interesting, such an introduction does help our people to be aware of and appreciate the church year and the particular emphasis of each worship service. Best of all are introductions from the lives and experiences of our people. Events and developments in the community, the nation and the world, in our home, our congregation and our synod provide endless opportunities. A word of caution, however, is in order. Introductions from life and experience should be familiar, true, current, timeless and never betray a confidence or give offense.

The introduction to your sermon deserves a few extra minutes of your time. It should be purposeful and preparatory. Keep it short and simple. Make it friendly and personal. Choose carefully your opening sentence. After you have done all that, your theme and parts should fall upon eager and expectant hearts. Students often ask questions about announcing theme and parts. Mostly they fear that doing so week after week will become mechanical and monotonous. Certainly we ought to find fresh and different ways to announce theme and parts. The main concern is that our people appreciate a quick preview of our plan, especially if we do not include theme and parts in the bulletin. But even if we do include them in the bulletin, most will appreciate and benefit from hearing them again. This is not the time to be cute, clever, mysterious. You have chosen your theme and parts with painstaking efforts. Your theme sums up the key thought of the text, the thought you wish to drive home. Hopefully it is also stated in the form of a proposition and suggests timely application. Your parts divide the theme and express the coordinate thoughts of the text. This is a crucial point in your sermon delivery. You have crossed the bridge from text to theme. Why not share with your hearers the thoughts which lay out the course for the next 15 to 20 minutes?

If the introduction to your sermon deserves your best effort, so does your conclusion. If a good beginning is important, a good conclusion is vital. The opening sentence gives the first impression, the concluding statement leaves a lasting impression. Both play an important part in making a good sermon better, in keeping a great sermon from becoming mediocre.

First let it be said that not every sermon needs a formal conclusion. In some cases the final application may make a good conclusion. There may be no need to recapitulate. If the final thought in your application makes a good conclusion, enables you to end with a gripping thought, that is the place to stop. We want to quit when interest is still high, not after we have walked the congregation around the same block for the third or fourth time or they have been anticipating an amen for the last several minutes.

Ordinarily we will feel a need for a conclusion. The rules are not much different from those for the introduction. Keep it brief, especially if you have just shared with your hearers a lengthy paragraph of application. Make sure it fits. There are many things one can say or might want to say to conclude a discourse but if the item is not apt, round out your sermon without it. It will prove to be more of a distraction than a finishing touch.

Be direct, get personal, make an appeal. You are speaking to God's people. You may do this by way of an exhortation or with a searching question. If not overdone, a Scripture or hymn verse or a prayer may be a fine concluding thought. Your final thought should be positive, encouraging, hopeful and joyful.

Especially the last sentence or sentences should be well chosen and carefully worded. Nothing is more frustrating to preacher and hearer alike than searching for a place to say amen. Know exactly what you want to say and how you are going to say it. Like the opening words of the introduction, these concluding thoughts should be memorized extra carefully.

The best introduction and conclusion will not make a poor sermon good or a mediocre sermon great. They are not the beginning and end of our sermon preparation. They are not the inner mansion, only the door by which we enter and leave. Yet they serve an important purpose in the art of preaching. Give them the few extra minutes they deserve for effective preaching to God's people.