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You Can Preach!

7 Simple Steps to
An Effective Sermon

Sherman Haywood Cox II, MS

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7 Simple Steps to an Effective Sermon
Version 0.7

By

Sherman Haywood Cox II

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About the Author

Sherman Haywood Cox II has been involved in Church leadership for the past 18 years. He has worked in churches in Alabama, Florida, and Tennessee. In 1992, He was ordained to the office of Elder in the Seventh-day Adventist Denomination at the Historic Black College Oakwood College in Huntsville, Alabama.

Pastor Cox is current a Master of Divinity student at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, Tennessee with an emphasis in Black Church Studies and Homiletics.

While at the seminary, Pastor Cox began to realize that the vast majority of African American preachers did not have the opportunity to attend seminary and thus he created the website SoulPreaching.Com to celebrate the Black Preaching Tradition as well as provide a vehicle to teach the principles that he was learning at the seminary.

In addition, uplifting the African American preaching tradition opens it up for emulation by preachers of all denominational and ethnic traditions. Because of these things, he has planed to create the most comprehensive free Black Preaching site on the web. Here is a link to our goals for 2007.

Also Pastor Cox is an accomplished Software Engineer with over 10 years experience and a Master of Science in Computer Science from the University of Alabama in Huntsville.

This short e-book is the first of many planned books that will teach the African American preaching tradition in a form that is accessible to all. If this book is of any help to you I praise God and request that you drop me a short note at freebook@soulpreaching.com.

In addition I invite all readers to visit my website at http://www.soulpreaching.com. I hope and pray that all who come to this site will find something to help them in their ministry to God's church.
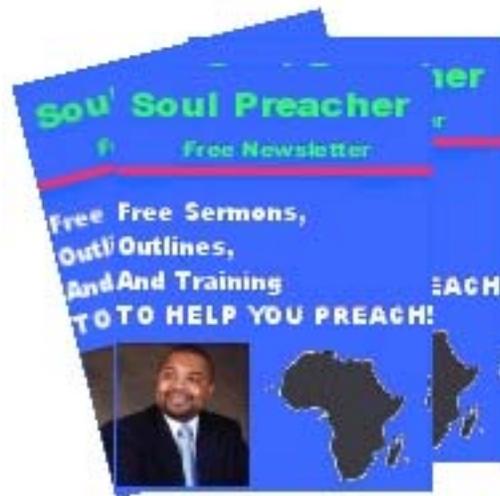
The Soul Preaching Newsletter

If you like this e-book you would probably enjoy the Soul Preaching e-newsletter. In this you will find sermonic help as well as other things that a preacher needs.

Please go on over to [Soul](#) Preaching and sign up for the [SoulPreaching e-newsletter](#).

Introduction

One of the frequently occurring emails from readers of SoulPreaching.Com is how do you put together an effective sermon? This question is often asked by new preachers who have to preach or have just felt the call of God on their lives. To answer this question I wrote a post entitled 7 steps to an effective sermon. The post gave an outline for a method. It is one of our most popular posts. Because of this I also recorded an audio podcase episode that demonstrated the method. However, something between a full scale homiletic and a 2 page post on a website was needed. Because of this I have decided to create this resource that might be considered an expansion of that web page.

I hope and pray that it will benefit the body of Christ and hasten the coming of Jesus Christ.

Sherman Haywood Cox II

Step 1 – Finding a Text

When you bear the responsibility of preaching, the first thing that you will need to do is find a text to preach. There are many ways of finding a text to preach. In this chapter we will look at three approaches.

Find a Text for a Theme

This is a common approach. Here you have in mind a theme that you wish to preach. Or perhaps a theme was assigned to you, perhaps you are to preach at a Mother's Day or a Youth Day program and they assign you a theme. Whatever the case, you would go looking for a text that will allow you to preach on that particular theme.

One of the drawbacks to such an approach is that you might be tempted to force a text to say what you want it to say rather than what the text wishes to convey. This possible problem can be alleviated by making sure that you allow the sermonic process to continue normally after choosing the text.

Another more significant problem is that over time if you only use this method of text selection you might not confront themes that need to be confronted in your own life and/or in the life of the congregation. If you usually use this method, I would suggest that at least periodically you go to a text and struggle with it to determine the theme that it suggests to you. One of the great benefits of struggling with the text is that the

sermon that comes out would not necessarily be what you might usually preach.

But even with its possible problems, it is still an important method of text selection that you as a preacher should use on occasion.

Random Text Selection

Another approach is to simply choose a text at random and attempt to preach on it. I do not really like this approach, but it can force you to do some creative preaching. You may find something to preach that you would normally skip. Thus this approach can be valuable.

Sometimes you are totally out of preaching material and a preaching engagement is coming up quickly. This approach of finding a text at random can sometimes help you to break through this "preacher's block."

Series

Some people preach a series on a Biblical book or some other theme. This approach has the benefit of opening the door to the preacher dealing with things that he or she might now otherwise deal with. Thus you get the benefit of the random text selection, plus you actually have a method to your madness.

This option also has the benefit of providing cover to a preacher. Let us say that you are dealing with a lot of sexual immorality in your church and you don't want

people to think you are picking them out. You might do a series on a book of the Bible that addresses that very subject among others. When you get to the parts on sexual immorality you can preach it and no one will think that you are unnecessarily picking at them, you are simply preaching the series.

Lectionary

A lectionary is a series of texts that are to be used in public worship. Many African American churches do not use the lectionary, but you as a preacher can look at it at least and see if you want to deal with one of the textual readings for this week. If you are to use the lectionary I would encourage you to visit two important resources on the web. First, there is the Vanderbilt Divinity School lectionary page. Here you will find all the lectionary readings. Second, there is the Text Week website where you will find a lot of web resources to help you in the exegesis and proclamation of the lectionary passage. Finally, I would encourage you to visit my own Lectionary Podcast site where you will see my approach to preaching the lectionary passages.

For more information on textual selection I would encourage you to purchase the John McClure edited book, *Best Advice for Preaching*.

Step 2: Interpret the Text for Preaching

OK you now have a text. How do you interpret the text specifically for preaching? This is an important consideration and should take a good amount of time. This method is structured along the lines of Dr. Brad Braxton's book *Preaching Paul*.

Prayer and Initial Reading of the Text – Note What Comes To Mind

We must always begin our study with prayer. Here we ask God to enlighten our minds that we might learn what it is God wants God's people to learn in the message.

The Bible text we have today at some point was read before congregations. We miss something when we only read it silently. Read it out loud. In addition, you want to note everything that comes to mind being sure not to hinder the imaginative process at this point. Frank Thomas notes in *They Like To Never Quit Praising God* that this first interaction with the text is sometimes where illustrations, stories, and titles can come to you.

Let us assume that you are reading a Psalm 121:1. "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help." You might remember that a psalm was a song of worship from other reading that you have done. Write that fact that. Perhaps it was your grandmother's favorite scripture. Write that Down. Maybe you remember why your grandmother loved the

story so much, if you do write that down. Maybe there are times that you don't believe that text, write that down. Maybe it reminds you of a song or a hymn write it down. Write all those things down.

These ideas and thoughts you have written down will become the raw materials that you will shape as you do a more in-depth exegesis of the text.[1]

Why should we do this, the answer is simple. You do this because at the beginning of your encounter with the text you have less preconceived notions, you are the most creative and you are not exactly sure yet what you will preach. Certainly some of the ideas you come up with will be discarded, but some might become sermon title material, or perhaps illustration material. The key is to tap into your thoughts early.

Literary Analysis

Next you need to do a literary interpretation of the scripture. Here we are seeking to understand the literary structure of the text. What are the words that the writer used? How are they used? Who is doing what in the scripture? I would also specifically ask four important questions. First, what is God doing in the text? Second, where is God in the Text? And third, what is humanity doing in the text? And finally, what is the action in the text?

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[1] I first want to remind you that this reading should include more than just the passage that you are preaching. You should also read at the very least the chapter before the text you are preaching and the chapter after to get some context.

Where is God in the text? Let us assume that you were preaching on Jesus' anguish cry from the cross found in Matthew 27:46, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" In the text, Jesus is God and Jesus is talking to God the Father. Where is God in the text? Jesus is feeling forsaken by God the father. However, God the Father appears to be forsaking Jesus. So God is forsaking and the one being forsaken. God is in Christ reconciling the world. But God also appears to be forsaking Christ.

Where is humanity in the text? Jesus is also a representative of humanity. Jesus here is representing forsaken humanity. The major players in the drama are the onlookers who hear the word; there is God the Father, Jesus, and the other people who are on the other crosses.

What is happening in the text? Jesus is crying to the father asking for why? God the father is saying nothing and humanity looks on and we find in other texts, they misunderstand Jesus' call as calling for Elijah. All of this material should be summarized and placed into the exegesis worksheet.

At this point we should go back to our initial list of considerations and add anything we get from this literary analysis and take away anything that is proven to be false by this in depth exegesis.

Historical – Rhetorical Analysis

Now we should look at the text historically and rhetorically. Now we must get out the commentaries and Bible Dictionaries and see what these tools tell us

about the original hearer(s) of the text and the author(s) of the text.

You should purchase a good Bible dictionary. I own the [Anchor Bible Dictionary](#) as well as the Harper Collins Dictionary.

Who the hearer and the author of a text are should changer our understanding of a text. For example, the fact that the book of Psalms is a collection of worship songs that had some added to over the years affects the interpretation of the book. For example Isaiah is split up into two or three components. Part of it was written to Israel before exile and part after exile. These facts can help us construct the life of the hearer. Certainly a text for comfort given to Israel in exile probably shouldn't be used if the preacher is trying to warn the contemporary congregation of impending doom.

In addition to the determination of who the hearer and the author of the text were, we should look at the rhetoric used by the writer. Let us assume again that you are preaching one of the texts that was meant to comfort Israel while in exile, you might notice the approach that the author uses to encourage this comfort. Sometimes the author will use animals as metaphors of the care of God for humanity. Perhaps these metaphors can be taken directly into today's context in the preaching, or perhaps they could be changed to find an equivalent one. At any rate, the exegete should discuss why certain words were used in the original text as a part of this step in exegesis.

At this point we should go back to our growing list of considerations and add anything we get from this

analysis and take away anything that is proven to be false by this step in exegesis.

Theology and Socio-Cultural Context

Now we continue our exegesis by looking at the theology of the authors as well as the socio-cultural context that the author addresses.

The first objective is to determine the picture of God that is painted by the Bible author. Who is God in this text? To go back to some an example we see God as one who seemingly forsakes, but also is forsaken in Matthew 27:46. God cries in anguish to God. So we have a picture of a vulnerable God because of the humanity that God assumed. We also have the picture of a God that is with humanity in the struggle with pain. We have a God who lives where humanity lives. The author of the text paints the picture of God with us.

Now we also need to look at the use of power in the text to get at the socio-cultural context of the text. Who has the power in the text? Is God helping those without power? How is God doing it? What is the theology of the writer? What does the writer think God is doing or how God is?

Let us look at another possible sermon altogether on the book of Exodus where God takes Israel out of Egypt. The power here is on the side of the Egyptians. Yet God chose Israel. The question becomes which side is God on. In this text God is on the side of the slave. The larger question becomes what does this

say about God? How will we integrate this into a sermon based on the text in Exodus?

At this point the preacher should refine the initial considerations further adding and taking away. Then you should attempt to encapsulate all of your exegesis into 2 double spaced pages. It will be difficult, but the effort used to do this will clarify the exegesis in your mind.

For a more in-depth approach to exegesis for preaching, I would suggest Brad Braxton's Preaching Paul, Paul Scott Wilson's The Practice of Preaching, and Thomas Long's The Witness of Preaching. I would also encourage you to visit my SoulPreaching.Com website.

Step 3 - Get a Sermonic Theme and Purpose

Now we are ready to begin thinking about the sermon itself. First we need to determine what the purpose of the sermon is. We are ready to do this because we have done our exegesis in the previous step.

Find a Theme

What is the theme that you have found emerging in the exegesis? Now we are moving from what the text **said** to what we will **say**. Here we are seeking to give a word from the Lord to God's people today on the basis of what the Bible author said in the past.

Sometimes the exegesis pushes a particular theme. For example, if all of our exegesis points to God's ultimate power over all evil then our theme would be God's power.

To get the creative juices flowing one might look at the dominant themes in scripture as defined by some preachers. Henry Mitchell in Soul Theology provides ten themes namely, the Providence of God, the Justice of God, the Majesty and Omnipotence of God, the Omniscience of God, the Goodness of God and Creation, the Grace of God, the Equality of Persons, the Uniqueness of Persons, the Family of God, and the Perseverance of Persons.   I provide a description of each of these on my website ShermanCox.Com. You might think of each of these themes and see if they tie in to your exegesis.

Samuel Proctor gives four basic themes namely: God is present and active, spiritual renewal and moral wholeness are available, genuine community is realized in God, and eternity is an ever-present reality.

Think on these things while looking at the text and the exegesis that you have done and one primary one should jump out at you. This is what Brad Braxton calls the Sermon's Gospel claim. What is the central claim you are making about God's good news?

You should write down the sermon theme when you have determined what it is. It may change some, but you should have a good idea of what it is at this point.

Purpose

Now that you have the basic Gospel Claim, what do you expect the people to do with what is revealed in the sermon? What is your purpose? Why are you preaching this sermon? Is it to encourage the weak? Then write that down. Is it to inform? Write that down. Maybe there is somebody who is questioning God's sovereignty. Write that down if God is leading you to that sermon.

Brad Braxton calls this the Gospel Conduct. What is it that you want the people to do as a result of hearing the sermon? Every sermon should have a behavioral purpose as Henry Mitchell calls it. We are preaching for transformation. Here you explicitly state what it is that you want the people of God to do as a result of hearing the sermon that God has given to you.

Step 4 – Think about the Conclusion, Introduction, and Title

Now that you have a theme and a purpose you should think about the title, as well as how you will begin and close the sermon. These are the three most important components of a sermon.[2] In this step you write 2 to 3 sentences describing how you will open and close the sermon as well as the title of the sermon.

Title

I am becoming more and more convinced that a good title is very important. On my website you will find a 5 page document that discusses the importance of the sermon title. I also posted a link to a video by Bishop C. D. Miller on how to create a sermon title that might be helpful. In a future e-book I will present a method for the creation of a sermon title that will be an expansion of this section.

The first step is to think of a short phrase that encapsulates the theme and purpose and yet does not give the whole sermon away. Along with the summarizing function, I would suggest that the title also be a phrase that can easily be turned into a refrain in the sermon. One of my sermon titles was "God ain't told you to Stop." It summarized the purpose and theme of the sermon as well as easily became something that I would repeat especially during the

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[2] There are some who would disagree that the Title is important, but at least in the African American tradition, the title is very important and deserves some careful thought.

conclusion of the sermon. For example, you may be about to give up, But God ain't told you to stop. You may have barriers in your way, but God ain't' told you to stop, etc.

When thinking of these two dimensions of the sermon title, J. Alfred Smith's categories of artistic title creation found in his out of print book *Preach On!* might be helpful. These examples are balance (ex "Christ or Chaos"), a simple sentence (ex "The Heart is a Door"), exclamation (ex "Stand Up!"), label (ex "The Prayer of the Righteous"), word play (ex "Jail House Rock"), rhyme (ex "Unity in Community"), and question (ex "My God, Why?"). Try to summarize the message and create a sermon title that can be used in a rousing conclusion that fits into each of these categories. Then after you have done that simply select the best one.

Introduction

Now look at your exegesis, especially the initial considerations portion and think about how you will begin this sermon. Be careful not to follow the old idea of telling people everything you will say. While it may be good in English composition, it is not a good sermonic practice to tell everybody exactly what you will say in a sermon.

Look for an image that grabs the interest of the people and leads them to the sermon. It should be relevant to the sermon. Do not tell a joke or a story that is not at all relevant to the sermon. Instead whet the appetite of the congregation and get them on board. As stated before, go back to your initial considerations and look for questions or stories that can point you to an

effective introduction. Now write out a 1 sentence description of how you will start the sermon.

Conclusion

I think that Celebration in the African American tradition as understood by Henry Mitchell in his work *Celebration and Experience in Preaching* is a good way to close the sermon. Here the preacher celebrates the Gospel that was presented in the sermon. There may be an exhortation, but it should usually be in a celebrative mood. Once again I would go back to your initial considerations and think about how you will celebrate the truth of the Gospel as presented in the sermon.

The conclusion should be related to the sermon. It should be a celebration of the gospel presented **IN THAT SERMON**. If you do not celebrate the gospel in the sermon then you will effectively erase the sermon from the minds of most hearers. You can find a 5 page discussion of Celebration in preaching on SoulPreaching.Com. Now write out a one sentence description of how you will conclude the sermon.

Step 5 – Create an Outline

How do you get from the introduction to the conclusion? Well there are a number of approaches to structuring a sermon. Thomas Long has a chapter in the Witness of Preaching that describes many different sermon structuring methods. I think that this is valuable especially when one is having trouble structuring a sermon, but in many cases the sermon structures itself as you interact with your exegesis and the introduction and conclusion that you have mapped out.

Brad Braxton spends little time talking about sermon structure in his introductory homiletics course. I used to wonder about that, but then I saw that if you have a purpose, theme, good introduction, good conclusion, and good exegesis that often structure will take care of itself.

I think a very good approach to structuring the sermon is found in James Webb's Preaching Without Notes. In that book Webb talks about looking in four basic places for material to illustrate the sermonic content. The first of these is current events. The preacher should look in current events for things that will illustrate the content of the sermon. Then the preacher should look in popular culture. Another popular place is history. Look in Black history, American History, World History, African History, Christian and denominational history. All of these places can have content to illustrate the sermon. Then one should look into ones own personal experiences. Webb suggests that preachers should keep a log of his or her experiences.

Webb suggests taking a sheet of paper and writing down everything that comes to ones mind. Then explicitly look at the four barrels and add to the material.

Then the preacher should simply arrange the material into a sermon. You can sometimes add and sometimes take away material. You can begin with the human problem (hidden in your purpose) and then show how the Gospel addresses the problem, or you can begin with the Gospel and show how the human problem does not affect or change the gospel. In other words you can begin with (human problem) itch and show how the Gospel Scratches the itch. Or you can begin with the gospel and show how the human problem really is not an itch or the human problem has already been scratched.

Let us take a sermon on God's sovereignty. Let us say that the purpose is to encourage the church to not be too fearful as they approach entering a new church building.

We can begin with the fear and show how God's sovereignty overcomes the fear. You can do this with examples in the text under consideration as well as illustrations from daily life.

Another approach would be to take God's sovereignty as the beginning. Here you talk about God's power over the future. Then you bring up fear and show how each of fear's characteristics have been overcome by the gospel of God's sovereignty.

Then the preacher simply adds the introduction and the conclusion material described above to get a full

sermon. For three good but very different approaches to sermon outlining you can see John McClure's [Best Advice for Preaching](#), Charles Koller's [How to Preach Without Notes](#), and James Webb's [Preaching Without Notes](#).

Step 6 - Write the Sermon

Now write out the sermon. Forget about grammar and spelling just get it on the paper. Here you basically flesh out all of the work you have done to this point. Write out the sermon as quickly as possible.

This really should not be too daunting at this point in that you have all the components of the sermon in front of you. While there are some preachers who use notes and others who do not, many write out the whole sermon whether they take it into the pulpit or not. Writing the sermon out can help you find problems in other steps. It can also help you find the perfect phrase for different parts of the sermon. I think that writing the sermon out is an important component of sermonic precision.

Step 7 - Edit and Polish

Finally, you should edit and polish your sermon. One of the few articles that address sermon polishing is Henry Mitchell who wrote a chapter in [Best Advice for Preaching](). I generally speak of editing and polishing a sermon in terms of 3 edits. You might look at each of these edits as a different dimension of a comprehensive edit of the sermon manuscript.

Theological Edit

First one should do a theological edit. Here we make sure that what we are saying about God is what we wish to say about God.

Rhetorical Edit

Second we should do a rhetorical edit. The glory of the African American pulpit is its great oratory. Here we should explicitly attempt to speak poetically. Remember that you are writing for the ear and not the eye. Look at your images. Can you speak of them more poetically? Can you use a better image that is more vibrant? As noted above [J. Alfred Smith's work]() can be helpful here.

Grammatical Edit

Finally we need a grammatical edit. When completing the other edits try not to allow spelling or grammar to deter you. But on this edit you want to ruthlessly

eliminate the grammatical and spelling errors that have entered into your sermon.

Summary

1. **Get a Text**
2. **Interpret the Text for Preaching**
   a. **Initial Observations**
   b. **Literary Analysis**
   c. **Historical Rhetorical Analysis**
   d. **Theological-Socio/cultural Analysis.**
3. **Get a Theme and Purpose**
4. **Work on Introduction, Conclusion, and Title**
5. **Create an outline**
6. **Write the Sermon**
7. **Edit the Sermon –**
   a. **Theological Edit**
   b. **Rhetorical Edit**
   c. **Grammatical Edit**

Worksheets

Here are some worksheets to facilitate exegesis. Please note that the questions are only suggestive and a starting point. Be sure to ask yourself any other questions that will help to illuminate the text.

Exegesis Worksheet

Step 1 - Initial Reading	What songs or hymns come to your mind?	
	What Stories come to your mind?	
	What other scriptures come to your mind?	
	What images come to your mind on first reading?	

	What other things come to your mind?	

Step 2 - Literary Analysis	Who are the major players in the text?	
	Where is God in the text and What is God doing?	
	Where is Humanity in the Text and What is humanity doing?	
	What is the major action that is happening in the text?	
	What is the genre of text?	

Step 3 – Historical-Rhetorical Analysis	Who is the author of the text?	
	Who are the original readers of the text?	
	What was the occasion that caused the writing?	
	What was the occasion of the reading?	
	Why does the author use the terminology and images that are used in the text?	

Step 4 – Theological – Sociocultural analysis	What does the text say about God?	
	Who has the power in the text?	
	How is God related to the power in the text?	
	What does the writer think that God is doing now?	
	How is God affecting the socio-cultural circumstances in the text?	

Sermon Creation Worksheet

Text	
Theme	
Purpose	
Introductory Images	
Conclusion Images	

You Can Preach the Sermon

Now one should practice the sermon until it is second nature. I do not think it matters whether one uses notes or not, but a sermon is well ready to preach when the preacher knows it so well that if the text flies away the preacher can still preach the gist of the message.

Additional Resources

Websites on preaching

There are a lot of resources available on the web. I would suggest three. First one should visit my own website SoulPreaching.Com. That is a celebration of the Black Preaching Tradition. Next, visit the African American Pulpit. This is the website of the excellent journal. You also should visit the Black and Christian website. That site has various resources that can help beginning preachers. A great site to aid exegesis is the Text Week site. You also should visit the Blogdigger's Preacher's Blogs. This is an amalgamation of many blogs that address preaching. Finally, you should visit the Preaching.Org site.

Books on Preaching

In addition to the sites above, you probably need a few books on preaching. A very good beginner's book on preaching is *Best Advice for Preaching* by John McClure. All new preachers should have that book.

I would also encourage you to purchase a basic book used in Introduction to Homiletics courses. You might purchase *The Practice of Preaching* by Paul Scott Wilson or *the Witness of Preaching* by Thomas Long. Both are very good texts.

In addition, you should have at least one book on black preaching.   A good book that looks at many approaches to the preaching moment by Black women
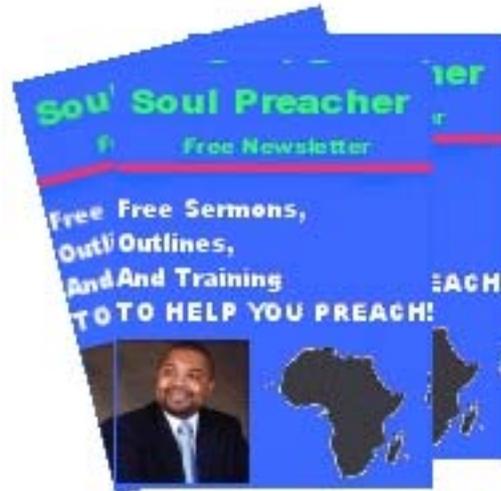
is Teresa Fry Brown's book *Weary Throats and New Songs*. This book includes much information for the new preacher. You probably should purchase Henry Mitchell's *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*. You also might look into Frank Thomas' book *They like to never quit praising God*. These resources will get you well on the way to preaching effective sermons.

The Soul Preaching Newsletter

If you like this e-book you would probably enjoy the Soul Preaching e-newsletter. In this you will find sermonic help as well as other things that a preacher needs.

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