

# Wilson's The Four Pages of the Sermon

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## An Overview of Paul Scott Wilson's *The Four Pages of the Sermon*

By: Stan Reid

Wilson presents the case that we need to move beyond narrative preaching in order to give more attention to theology and the actions of God. In his words, "Gradually I found that I moved beyond narrative, not leaving it behind, but being more attentive to those things like theology and the role of God that had taken a back seat while [narrative preaching] made its mark."

According to Wilson, sermons too often lack sensory appeal. In response, he develops a strategy for composing the sermon text as a movie director would. For Wilson, the preacher aims to see "the set" of the biblical text and vividly describe the geography, the people, and the action. However, as Wilson recognizes, there is always the danger of distorting the text in this movie making technique.

Although this technique gives much attention to the visual, we should not abandon the lessons learned from essay writing. For example, each paragraph should have one idea and one idea only. There is to be one main theme. Likewise, we still need to give attention to grammar and sentence structure in sermon preparation.

This reminds me of a speech made by Stephen Spielberg when he accepted the Thalberg Award from the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences 1987. Addressing his peers in the movie industry, he warned that the tremendous achievements in technology and special effects endangered the power and effect of the written word. Spielberg made a passionate appeal for his peers to return to the written word in the making of movies (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjrL0qOtGXA>). As our culture becomes more enamored with technology and visual effects, preachers would do well to heed the same appeal.

However, for the spoken word, we must discard other essay rules. For example, the rules of no repetition, factual reporting without detail, avoidance of descriptive material, and elimination of conversations do not apply to the sermon. Writing a sermon manuscript can be a good discipline. However, the effectiveness of the spoken word is the aim.

Wilson draws on two metaphors for his homiletic method. *Movies* develop the need for creative imagination in sermons and model its movement. *Pages* stress the need for theology to shape the sermon and best describe how to accomplish this. He then uses the illustration of the webpage to argue that this page carries both written and visual content.

The image of four pages is a metaphor and not four literal pages. The method seeks to emphasize the biblical and theological functions of the sermon. Wilson believes that sermons based on this model will be:

1. Biblical.
2. Imaginative.
3. Theological—strengthened by dialogue with the historic Christian tradition.
4. Pastoral—links local and global needs with the love of God.

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5. Evangelical—in the broadest sense of the term because it embraces concern for spiritual renewal and the joyful proclamation of the gospel.

Wilson's method also calls for serious attention to sermon preparation and scheduling adequate time for that preparation. "... faithful preaching is never off the cuff, and the need for well-prepared sermons is more urgent now...than it has ever been."

### The Advantages of Four Pages

1. A practical and effective way to do theology and to facilitate theological renewal in preaching.
2. Attention is given to the sermon throughout the week with each page being given primary attention on a different day.
3. Helps us be more imaginative with our sermons.
4. Is helpful in avoiding moralism.
5. Encourages us to **write** parts of the sermon each day.

### MONDAY: GETTING STARTED

The goal is to achieve sermon unity. Wilson suggests six signs that preachers should observe before moving to sermon composition. Following these signs can give us direction along the "homiletical highway" to sermon unity. These signs are one Text, one Theme, one Doctrine, one Need, one Image, and one Mission. The acronym TTDNIM can serve as a memory device for remembering the signs. Although corny, Wilson's little sentence is memorable. **The Tiny Dog Now Is Mine** sticks in my mind as well as Mark's Very Extravagant Mother Just Sent Us Nine Parakeets.

#### Text:

- Scripture as the Word of God provides our immediate authority to preach.
- The issue of text selection—lectionary, topic, series on a particular "book" or section of Scripture, personal selections.
- Determine the textual boundaries, [variant readings], check translations, and consult commentaries.
- The exegetical process raises many literary, historical, [sociological and theological] questions that should be addressed.

#### Theme:

- Begin looking for one clear theme that God would want communicated to this audience in this sermon.
- The theme statement is not adequate for a summary, but is a clear marker along the path among other possibilities.
- During the sermon presentation, the theme statement will need qualification, illumination, exemplification, and explanation.
- It is the handle for the text.
- It should be posed as a declarative sentence making a specific statement about the topic and its relationship to the text. It makes a connection between the topic and a theological claim.

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- It is about God—must show what God is doing in or behind the text—i.e., God is the subject of the sentence.
- Use a strong, active verb.
- When a text seems to be silent about God, find where God is behind the text or in the larger sweep of events to which the episode belongs.
- Keep it short.
- Focus on God's grace.

### Doctrine:

- Pausing at this sign gives us direction from the teaching of the church on a particular aspect of the historic Christian faith. Theology is commonly systematic reflection on a theme in Scripture.
- Several doctrines may be referenced in any given biblical pericope.
- Ask which doctrine most accurately "says the text in other words."
- Examine the table of contents in systematic theology texts for areas to read.
- "At its best, doctrinal expression adds humanity, not abstraction to preaching—for deep thought is often the product of suffering and healing, blood and balm."
- This discipline of weekly reading in theology will facilitate your theological expression.
- "Among preachers who are most likely to be rejected or experience meltdown in ministry are those who think they can get along without doctrine or excellent teaching in preaching, and depend on relational skills in day-to-day ministry. Relationships, however, are not separate from theological tasks at the heart of the office of preaching."
- The purpose of limiting the theme to one doctrine is to make the sermon simple and clear while giving depth to the understanding of the Christian faith. It is not a venue for displaying the preacher's knowledge.

### Need:

- The doctrine should manifest how God meets a particular need in *this* congregation.
- It is not necessarily a need that the congregation feels or perceives.
- Two ways to identify congregational need:
  - What question does this answer in the life of a person or people in the church?
  - Use the doctrine selected for the theme statement to construct a question. Cf. Shirley Guthrie in *Christian Doctrine*. Each doctrinal category is shaped as a question. E.g., Revelation is, "How can we find God?" Creation is, "What are we doing here?" Sin is, "Why don't you just be yourself?" Incarnation is, "Where is God?" Resurrection is, "Who's in charge here?" The Holy Spirit is, "What's new?" Eschatology is, "What's going to happen to us?"
- Include the question at least twice in the sermon.

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### Image:

- An image is a word picture like a road, bus stop, maple tree, cup, loaf of bread, chain, etc.
- An abstract idea like love, anger, hope, faith, etc. is not an image.
- The listeners will typically find multiple images in a sermon, but you are looking for one image that will become dominant and help unify the sermon.
- Repetition of the image in the sermon becomes like a highlighter mark on a page.
- Sources for images include:
  - The biblical text.
  - Our world: a building, a person (e.g., Scott Beamer and “Let’s Roll!”), a power plant control room, etc.
  - A refrain or rhetorical phrase. This need not contain an actual picture.
- The image should not take over and compete with the theme statement, but support and strengthen it.

### Mission:

- A sermon should result in faith and action.
- Focus on one action of ministry.
- “Listeners are led to mission by the Holy Spirit and any part of the sermon may function to awaken an individual to service.”
- Communicate this one action clearly, forthrightly, yet without a hint of judgment or superiority.
- Mission is not a task but a privilege, honor, and opportunity.
- Avoid being moralistic. Moralism places the burden on the individual and removes the joy of grace. This does not remove nor limit Christian responsibility. Christian mission is to join God’s work in the world. We are empowered to do that work by divine grace.

### TUESDAY: PAGE ONE

- This page addresses trouble [sin] in the Bible.
- Human sinfulness and its consequences are named.
- Human responsibility for correction [repentance] in light of God’s will is also submitted. [See *Speaking of Sin* by Barbara Brown Taylor.]
- The presence of sin is recognized. Sometimes it is explicit—e.g., David and Bathsheba. Other times it is implicit—e.g., the Corinthian church. We depend upon the Bible to illumine the trouble that will be addressed in the sermon.
- Although the theme statement will not be fully developed in the sermon presentation until Page Three it is best not to begin Page One without it.
- Likewise, the focus of each page should be stated in one short sentence at the beginning of each page.
- May need to ration textual material in order to save some fresh material for Page Three.
- Draw on your sources (texts, translations, lexicons, concordance, Bible dictionaries, and commentaries).

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- Try to visualize the geography, people, and action. However, use caution so that the text is not distorted.
- Wilson provides an extensive checklist for each page. He gives a short version of the checklists for the entire sermon in the Appendix.

### WEDNESDAY: PAGE TWO

- This page addresses trouble [sin] in our world.
- Some things remain the same: the unchanging nature of God and the continuing nature of human behavior. God continues to speak through the Bible in the church. People continue to come to church with complacency or trouble in their hearts and concerns about a range of human conditions.
- We need our world to be discussed in the sermon because our ways are not God's ways. The status quo is inadequate: there is trouble in us and we are in trouble.
- Establish the tension between grace and trouble, the same tension that appropriately exists in faith.
- Salvation exists not in the trouble or in the grace on its own, but in the juxtaposition of the two.
- We put grace after trouble, rather than interweave them because:
  1. Each needs to be heard in its own right.
  2. Trouble intensifies the need for God.
  3. The joyous message of Easter follows Good Friday.
  4. Christ offers hope, not despair—for the sermon to offer hope it must place the final emphasis not on human action but on God's.
- Whereas people may leave God out of their questions, the preacher does not. The preacher leads the people to reshape their questions about life as theological questions.
- Humor is helpful when talking about trouble. Page Two easily becomes too intense or depressing.

### THURSDAY: PAGE THREE

- This page addresses God's gracious work in the Bible.
- This is a theological movement from brokenness and trouble to restoration and grace.
- Here we put our trouble in perspective before the cross. Grace is not cheap. It does not remove the responsibility to obey, act, and respond to God. However, the emphasis is on God's action on our behalf. This keeps the sermon theocentric and not anthropocentric.
- "It is as though many preachers have been taught excellent exegetical skills but not the use of theology in reading Scripture. If we have not been trained to see God in the biblical text or to name God acting in the world, we will find it hard to speak about God in ways accessible to congregations."
- This where the theme is developed more fully into something that gives purpose and theological meaning to the ordinariness of life.
- Here one or two other texts that reinforce the theme sentence might be used.
- God is the actor and it is crucial that the Christ event/story be linked here.

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### PAGE FOUR: FRIDAY

- This page addresses God's gracious work in our world.
- Signs of God's action in our world are sought on this page as it was recognized in the biblical text on Page Three.
- Four foundations of Page Four:
  1. Applies God's grace from the biblical world to our circumstances.
  2. Provides a sustained focus on God's action in the world helping the listeners to encounter the crucified and resurrected Christ.
  3. Provides a balance to Page Two and the trouble there.
  4. Puts the world into appropriate juxtaposition or tension with grace. It does not erase Page Two, and does not suggest 'happily ever after,' but it sounds a strong alternative of grace in the midst of everyday life.
- Dangers to avoid:
  1. To trivialize God's action.
  2. To pile on the actions of God.
  3. To make God's action mechanical, part of the nature of the universe.
  4. To portray God's action in the future rather than in the past and continuing into the present.
  5. To portray nature as an unambiguous sign of God's grace.
  6. To minimize the ambiguity. We invite people into the centrality of faith, not the proof of faith. God's action in the present does not result in 'happily ever after' outcomes.
  7. Reluctance to claim God's action because we do not know the outcome of a particular situation. God still contends with the powers of evil.

### The Conclusion

- Need not be a summary.
- Six strategies:
  1. Return to a story from the sermon or use a new story.
  2. Return to the doctrine.
  3. Return to the dominant image.
  4. Return to the congregational needs.
  5. Return to the mission.
  6. Move to the cross and resurrection.

Variations on the four pages: The pages can be arranged in various orders, but the sermon should always end with the word of grace.

Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press) 1999.