

Chapter Four: How to prepare a One Point message.

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My discovery of the One Point Message

The biggest discovery I've made in my preaching in the last few years happened when I came across a book, 'Communicating for a Change' by Andy Stanley. The message of the book was revolutionary: 'Whenever you preach, make just one point. Say one thing very well. If you say two things you say too much. Less is more. And everything in the message - everything! - must support that one point. And if there are any sub-points they should only occur in a non-dominant way as part of the application section of the one point.' Interesting idea, I thought.

I listened to a few of his messages online and, although I didn't think of him as a highly gifted preacher, I found his messages to be highly impacting. I remembered most of what he said, and sensed how his One Point got under my skin and shaped my life in the days after hearing the message. The fact that his church has grown to 20000 in attendance in ten years says something about the possible effectiveness of this kind of communication.

I began to experiment with it in some of my own preaching and, thrillingly, my preaching seemed to have a bigger impact than ever before - on both myself and those I was preaching to, and it really seemed to make people come back to church again, whether they were Christians or non-Christians.

Reasons for the One Point Message

- *People are more likely to be impacted by a message they remember.*
 - And they're more likely to remember a message where less is said, a message that is built around just one point.
 - If people forget what you say within hours or days, do you really think you preached a life-changing message?

- Many point messages are forgotten within hours, sometimes minutes. Ecclesiastes 12:10,11 speaks of a teacher whose teachings are like nails. Think of a point as a nail. When you preach many points, each nail of truth is just shallowly hammered in. But if you preach one point, that nail has enough time and focus to get hammered deep into a person's memory and life.
- *If, in a message, you preach a great point and then a second great point, the two points work against each other's impact.*
 - When painting, a good practice is to paint one layer at a time. Let it dry before painting over it. In the same way, if we preach two points back to back, it is like painting a new layer before the other dries.
 - Jesus taught his disciples over a period of three years. He took it slowly, teaching one layer of truth at a time. And letting it dry before another layer of teaching was applied.
 - We only have heart-space for one noble thought at a time. If you preach two or more points there is a real sense of overload.
 - Just because a person is taking notes, does not mean that the truth has time to sink in. And how many people read the notes later and then give each point time to sink in? Not many. It is the living message, not the notes of the message, that changes people.
- *There are other Sundays.*
 - When you are preparing and you just have so much amazing stuff to say, remember that there are other Sundays coming. Fifty-two in a year in fact. That means that over ten years people will hear up to 500 messages. Take your time.
 - If you only get to preach once and not again, resist the temptation to shove a series of teachings into one message. After all, do you want a message with high impact or low impact? If you want to impact people deeply, don't hammer too many nails in. They will all fall out. Choose one nail and hammer it in deeply instead, so that it doesn't fall out.
- *Expository preaching is not the only kind of preaching God blesses.*
 - Often people who resist one point preaching do so because they so deeply believe that expository is the best kind of preaching. We have all felt the power of someone drawing out three or four points from a portion of Scripture. And since we believe that God's Word is the Word of God we can easily see the value of just unpacking the book, verse by verse, and giving a message, point by point.
 - But let me say a few things that remind us that there are other kinds of preaching that God will also bless:
 - 1) We have no account in the New Testament of anyone preaching expositively. Rather, in both Jesus' and the apostle's teachings we see that selected truths from God's

Word were spoken to people, usually based on the situation they were facing.

- 2) Another way of saying point 1) above is that although all of God's Word is equally inspired, not all of God's Word is equally urgent and applicable to the people at hand, right now. I can imagine you're thinking this point is heresy, but it's not. Wise teachers factor in the truths that people most need to hear right now, considering their current context and stage of spiritual maturity. All people need to hear all of the truths in God's Word, but not right now. Which ones do they most need right now to move forward spiritually?
 - 3) Even great expository teaching with many points often has low impact, for the simple reasons stated above: too many points at one time neutralise each other!
 - 4) Bible knowledge is important, but application of the truths in the Bible is far more important. Preaching is not ultimately about information, but rather about transformation. Just because we're helping people to get knowledge of the Bible and doctrine does not mean their lives are being significantly shaped.
- *One Point messages are often structurally simple enough to memorise and, therefore, to preach with very little use of notes.*
 - I know of no more powerful way to really grab and engage people than to preach without constantly looking at notes. Notes often make you stand behind a lecturn / pulpit / stand. That immediately separates you spatially from the people so it's harder to touch hearts. Preaching, if we take Jesus' example seriously, should be conversational and dialogical. You are not delivering academic information. And you are not speaking at people, but to people and with people.
 - One Point messages are simple enough in structure to memorise, so that you loosely follow that structure. This way it comes across as a conversation. And it allows you to walk away from the pulpit, perhaps even walking into the aisles.

Finding the One Point

By far the most difficult part of One Point messages is finding the One Point.

Here are some examples of One Points:

- *Invite the Spirit to fill you and lead you everyday.*
- *Offer yourself to the God who owns you.*
- *Spiritual growth happens best in community.*
- *God keeps his promises always.*

- *Sexual purity paves the way to real intimacy.*
- *Welcome Jesus gladly - you'll be glad you did.*
- *Come closer to Christ and he will come closer to you.*
- *There is a miracle at the end of your obedience.*
- *Live by faith not by feelings.*
- *Live loved.*
- *Fuel your faith on the Word of God.*
- *Our church is called to be a force for good in the world.*

Some keys to finding your One Point

Some of the keys to finding your main point include:

- Get on your knees before God with the prayer, 'God, what one thing do you want me to say to these people, something that will be lodged deep in their minds and hearts?'
- Understand that most times a Scripture comes first, and then, from it you draw out the One Point that you feel God wants you to share. Sometimes, however, the One Point comes first and then you look for a Scripture portion that says that best.
- Be ready to rethink and reword the One Point again and again, until you feel it best sums up in a simple sentence the message you feel God wants you to communicate. Keep digging until you find it.
- Build everything around that point. I know how hard it is to leave out the precious insights that do not directly connect to the One Point, especially when they are alive in you, but if they do not support the One Point they must be held onto for another, later message.

A suggested structure of a One Point Message

- A One Point Message never feels like it is very information-intensive, but this does not mean that it lacks structure. The structure is hidden from view. Only the speaker is aware of it.
- I took Andy Stanley's suggested structure (which he simplifies as 'ME - YOU - GOD - YOU - WE' - read his book if you want to know more about it) and developed and clarified it for myself. I combined his suggestions with some of my own discoveries and came up with a six phase structure for preaching a One Point message. Here it is...

1) Phase One: Begin your message with connection and curiosity:

a. Two goals of the introduction:

- Connect with people, and build trust.
- Make people curiously want to hear what you are going to say, by surfacing in their minds and hearts a need or a question. Do this long enough for them to want some resolution.

- b. Remember that there may be non-Christians here so do this part in a way that includes them too.
- c. Read more about preparing an introduction in the previous chapter of this manual.

2) *Phase Two: Scripture build-up to the One Point:*

- a. Use a transition sentence from the beginning section to Scripture: 'Let's turn to a section of the Bible that powerfully speaks to this issue / question...'
- b. Engage people with one section of the Bible. Never bore people with the Bible. Don't read long sections without some enlivening commentary.
- c. But don't say the One Point yet. They need to be thinking, 'He said that this section of the Bible would powerfully speak to a certain issue, I wonder what it will say.' Hold that One Point close to you, much like you would hold a card in a card game. Save it for a strategic moment.
- d. Open up the text, but only insofar that it lays a foundation for, and develops the One Point.

3) *Phase Three: Say and repeat the One Point:*

- a. Transition sentence: 'When we look at this section of Scripture, we see how God speaks to us around the issue (the one surfaced in the beginning). And this is what He says: ...'
- b. Then say the One Point.
- c. Say it slowly. Repeat it two or three times. At this point people need to be feeling some resolution. And because of the build up in the introduction and in the Scripture people are really hearing what you are saying.
- d. This is the climax of the message.
- e. Say, 'If you remember anything from this message, remember this. I believe it is the one thing God wants to say to us today...'

4) *Phase Four: Amplify the One Point:*

- a. No transition sentence is needed. Now that the One Point has been made, linger there. In the same way an amplifier takes the sound of a guitar and amplifies it, so spend some time amplifying the message...
- b. There are several possible ways to amplify the One Point. Don't do all, just some.
 - 1) Point to one or more other Scriptures that say the same thing. If you have already spent considerable time in the Scripture section, this is not needed. But if the Scripture section was short, you may need to bulk up on rooting this truth in God's Word.

2) Illustrate the One Point with personal stories, illustrations or analogies. Make sure the truth is translated into picture form.

3) Say the same point with other words. Explain it from other angles.

4) Tell of a time when you did apply this to your life and how it benefited you and your walk with God.

5) Tell of a time when you failed to apply this to your life and how it hurt you and your walk with God.

6) Do something visually to illustrate it. Call people up. Show a short clip. Use an object lesson.

- c. Notice that everything you are saying is supporting that One Point. Everything. And the more you amplify it the more you hammer that truth deeper into their lives. And this requires time and sustained focus on just one truth.

5) *Phase Five: Apply the One Point with a few brief subpoints:*

- a. Use a transition sentence, 'Let me suggest a few ways in which you and I can apply this to our lives this week...'
- b. Go through 3 or 4 ways people can apply this message to their lives. Keep these subpoints simple and not too long.
- c. Ideally these subpoints should not take up more than 20-40% of the whole talk time. This is what makes a One Point message different from a multi-point one: in a multi-point message the subpoints are a dominant feature of the message, taking up about 70-90% of the message, whereas in a One Point message they are a minor feature. Also, in a One Point message these minor subpoints are always applications of the One Point.
- d. Whenever you are thinking about these possible ways to apply the One Point to people keep in mind these four angles:
 - i. How does the One Point apply to various stages of life: to teens? single adults? married people? parents?
 - ii. How does the One Point apply to various daily occupations? To those studying? To those working? To house-moms? To our leisure-activities? To our finances?
 - iii. How does the One Point apply to various stages of faith? To non-Christians? To new Christians? To more mature Christians? And to leader-type Christians?
 - iv. How does this One Point apply to the two dimensions of our faith? To us as a community? To us as individuals?
- e. Always try to make one subpoint specifically address non-Christians. Make sure that it is clear for them how this One Point applies to them too.
- f. Generally, be very specific when calling people to do things this very week. Despite our romantic notions, no one has the power to hear a message and then choose to do it for the rest of their lives. The best chance of them doing it ongoingly is if they do it this week, so ask

them to do it this week. For example, don't ask people to read their Bibles everyday from now on. Rather call them to read a chapter a day just for this week, and see how it impacts on their lives.

- 6) *Phase Six: Land with an inspiring story or an inspiring vision for our community related to the One Point.*
 - a. Use a transition sentence: 'Let me end this talk by telling you a story.' Or, 'Let me end this talk by lifting our sights as a spiritual community'.
 - b. This part really needs to touch hearts.
 - c. There are two ways to do it:
 - i. Tell a story that illustrates the power of this One Point.
 - ii. Cast a vision for how our lives and how our community would be better if we really lived just this One Point. This is a great opportunity for a leader to move a community towards a God-given vision.
 - d. Decide whether you will then land in a prayer, or perhaps in an invitation to respond in some way (e.g. put up your hands, come to the front, ask yourself this question etc), or both.
- Generally write your beginning section last. Once you have found your One Point ask yourself, 'How can I make people want to hear this truth? What question can I surface or what common human experience or need can I highlight?'
 - For example: if your One Point is 'Sexual purity paves the way to??? real intimacy' the angle you can take is something like this: 'We live in a sex-mad world. All around us, it looks like those who get to have sex, and get to have it often are *gaining* something. Just think of the ads and songs that suggest that (then bring some specific ones to people's attention). But I was wondering, 'Although it *seems* like sex with lots of different people causes you to *gain* something, is there anything *lost*?' That is a question I have been pondering. Have you ever wondered that?'
 - Another example: if your One Point is 'Fuel your faith on God's Word' the angle you could take in the introduction could be something like this: 'You don't have to be a Christian long to realise that the thing you need most is faith. Faith is that deep confidence in God that is like a fire in your heart. But here's what I've found: that fire seems to fade and sometimes gets reduced to a flicker on the edge of being snuffed out. The question I have been asking is, 'Is it up to God to keep that flame burning? Or is it up to me? And if it is up to me, is there anything I must do to keep it burning? And to make it burn even more brightly? Have you ever asked that question?'
 - One of the most common mistakes preachers make is to assume that everyone is hungry to hear what you have to say to them. You have to make them hungry first, or at least get them to ponder how hungry

they are. Andy Stanley often takes up 20 % of his message in this beginning section. He understands that people are going to be more impacted by a message that they are hungry to hear.

- In the beginning section be as vulnerable as you can, since this will help people trust you and connect with you.

An analogy for the Six-phase structure of the One-Point Message

This six-phase structure of a One Point Message can seem a bit clinical if you just read the words. That's why I prefer to think of the structure with a picture in my head.

I have found it helpful to compare doing a One-Point Message to being a mountain guide taking people up and down a mountain. This picture best describes the energy-flow of the message. Let me explain:

- *Phase One: Begin your message with connection and curiosity:*
 - This is like a mountain guide trying to recruit some climbers to come up a mountain with him. They won't do so till they feel safe with the guide and they feel drawn to the mountain with a curiosity and hunger.
- *Phase Two: Scripture build-up to the One Point:*
 - This is like the slow but steady meander up the mountain. For every step taken there is a growing anticipation of the summit. And all steps lead to the summit that they have yet to discover.
- *Phase Three: Say and repeat the One Point:*
 - This is the summit moment. Everyone arrives at the mountain top. And what a joy it is. And what a "aha!" moment it is. The movement stops for a while as everyone pauses to ponder the beauty of it all, and just take it all in.
- *Phase Four: Amplify the One Point:*
 - The guide spends some time on the mountain peak showing people the different views from it. People become more familiar with it, and begin to see things from its perspective.
- *Phase Five: Apply the One Point:*
 - The team of climbers descend. While the journey up was loaded with curiosity, the journey down is more focused and has the momentum of descent. It energises people to move. The guide does not need to lure them down, just guide them down.

- *Phase Six: Land with an inspiring story or an inspiring vision for our community related to the One Point.*
 - The team and the guide finish the trip. On the one hand there is a sense of gratifying after-glow and on the other hand there is an anticipation of how life will be different now that life has been seen in a fresh way from the mountain top.

Some One Point Messages to listen to

I recommend spending a few hours listening to some One Point messages. As you do ask yourself these questions:

- *What is the structure behind this message?*
- *In what ways is this effective?*
- *In what ways is this lacking?*

Here are two sources of one point messages:

- Listen to messages by Andy Stanley on www.northpoint.org/messages. You will notice that he thoughtfully structures his message around one highly impacting point. If you have sufficient bandwidth to download the visuals of him preaching (see the flash option) you will also notice how he never stands behind anything, and he seldom looks at notes. Notice also how he often sits down and preaches, and how he brilliantly models preaching as conversation enlarged.
- Listen to some of my early experimental One Point messages. And feel free to evaluate the effectiveness of it as you do...
 - www.friends-first.com/content/uploads/other%20talks/2006-Terran-Christmas.mp3 (this was a short evangelistic message, for kids and adults at the same time)
 - www.friends-first.com/content/uploads/sunday%20talks/2007-06-24CloserToChristTW.mp3 (notice that this message is a hybrid of a Andy Stanley-type one point message and a multiple-point message)
 - www.friends-first.com/content/uploads/sunday%20talks/Rom6-Terran-31Dec06.mp3
 - www.friends-first.com/content/uploads/sunday%20talks/2007-01-07InviteHStofillandleadyouTW.mp3
 - www.friends-first.com/content/uploads/sunday%20talks/2007-03-18amStepOutOfTheBoatTW.mp3

Getting creative

One of the funnest things about preaching for me is that there are several different kinds of message structure. I like to experiment with different approaches.

1) In the last chapter, we looked at preparing multi-point messages. In this chapter, we looked at one point messages. There is a hybrid kind of message, that combines multi-point and one point messages, by stretching the application subpoints of a one point message to take up about fifty percent of the message. This way, the first half of the message makes the one point. And the second half of the message mainly helps the hearers to apply this one point with more-dominant-than-usual subpoints.

2) There is another kind I want to briefly draw your attention to: I call it *the super-creative message*. These messages are beyond categorising, simply because they are so fresh in their approach. As a general rule, once you know how to preach multi-point and one point messages, try experiment with totally different ways of structuring messages. A person who excels in innovative message structure is Rob Bell. Perhaps, spend some time listening to some of his talks on www.marshall.org/teaching/index.php. See if there's something you can learn from him with regard to his style of communicating. Also, be sure to watch his Nooma video called 'Rain' and notice how he tells a story, and at different parts of the story he weaves biblical meaning for our lives. The meaning for our lives is almost visually 'pegged' to different parts of the story he tells.

Being super creative in structure does not mean that you have to hold back on Scriptural intensity. For example, listen to a message I did, called Song of the Servant, that goes verse by verse through Isaiah 53, but very creatively: www.friends-first.com/content/uploads/sunday%20talks/2007-06-03SongOfTheServantTW.mp3

Also, just for the freshness of it, listen to Bono preach at the USA president's prayer breakfast: www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUdrYDk8rVA