

HOW TO ASSESS A SERMON: A CHECKLIST FOR RULING ELDERS

The Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (X:3) requires ruling elders to “have particular concern for the doctrine and conduct of the minister of the Word and help him in his labors.” This is “in order that the church may be edified, and may manifest itself as the pillar and ground of the truth.” (Directory for Worship, VI:B:2). No small part of this duty is fulfilled as the ruling elders thoughtfully assess the preaching that comes to a congregation on a weekly basis. Whether the preaching is by the church’s pastor or by a visiting speaker, e.g. another minister, a licentiate, or an intern, ruling elders have a responsibility to assess the preaching both to assist the one who preaches and to provide for the edification of the church.

Ruling elders often feel ill equipped to fulfill this responsibility because they do not have objective criteria for assessing sermons. Not wanting to be critical of the servant of the Lord who ministers, and not wanting their subjective reactions to become a standard for assessing preaching, by default they leave this aspect of their ruling work undone. This deprives a preacher of what could well be invaluable assistance in improving his preaching, and it may well deprive the congregation of the kind of pulpit ministry which elders ought to seek to provide for the congregations they are called to serve.

The following list is designed to help ruling elders look for specific elements which should mark every sermon. It is not designed to encourage ruling elders to be unnecessarily critical of sermons, but rather to help them grow in their understanding of what an edifying sermon ought to be or to include. May the list be of help to you as you listen thoughtfully, make suggestions wisely, and as you oversee both ministers and congregations with a view toward their growth in grace and in knowledge.

- Is the sermon *textual*, i.e. confined to a verse or small portion of Scripture, *topical*, i.e. dealing with a theme that is not confined to one text but rather refers to many verses used to develop a particular point, or *consecutive expository*, i.e. part of a sermon series on a book or a particular extended portion of Scripture, e.g. the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord’s Prayer? Is the preacher clear as to what type of sermon he is preaching?
- Is there an introduction? Does the introduction capture the attention of the congregation and, at the same time, actually introduce the sermon?
- Did the preacher give his outline and develop the sermon so that it was easy to follow where he was going? Were the points so impressed upon the hearers that they were memorable. Can you state the basic points of the sermon after the sermon is complete.
- Did the preacher deal with the actual words and phrases of his text(s), or did he seem to fly over them? (There is a difference between preaching *about* a text, and *preaching* a text or texts. Good preaching does the latter.)? Did he explain and apply the texts in their context?
- Were there sufficient illuminating devices in the sermon, e.g. illustrations, metaphors, so that the more difficult points were made clear to the congregation? Were the illustrations (biblical or extra-biblical) appropriate?
- Was the argument of the sermon compelling? Were your mind, your will, and your emotions persuaded by the preacher’s message?
- Did the preacher make applications of his text(s) throughout the sermon? Did the applications legitimately grow out of the text(s) as he developed them? Did he take the time to impress the applications on the consciences of the hearers so that the hearers knew how they need to think, feel, and act differently based on what the Word of God says?
- Was Christ preached or was the predominant theme something other than Christ and the Gospel? Would an unsaved hearer understand clearly what the Gospel message is as a result of that

sermon? Are believers challenged to specific repentance from sin and renewed faith in Christ as Savior and Lord? Was the fulfillment of Christian duties presented as coming from the grace, strength, resources, and motivations of Christ and the Gospel, or were the hearers cast upon their own resources to do what God tells them to do?

- Was there a conclusion to the sermon, or did it just stop? Did the conclusion serve to make a *final* impression on the hearts of the hearers, or did it simply summarize what was said?
- Did the preacher preach with earnestness, and with something of a life and death conviction that his message *must* be heard, or was there nonchalance in the preacher's manner and delivery? Did the preacher actually *proclaim* the truth as a representative of Christ the King, or was he content to simply impart knowledge of the Bible?
- Did the preacher actually labor to communicate with the congregation or did he speak over the heads of those present? Was there material in the sermon to which even the children could relate and appreciate? Did he so labor to communicate that he cheapened or distorted the message he was delivering?
- Was the preacher's language suitable to ministry of the word? Were there glaring grammatical errors or misuses of words or phrases?
- Was there superfluous material in the sermon? Would less have been more?
- Did the preacher make use of "you" in his applications, or did he continually use the inclusive expression "we"? (Good preaching will include the frequent [but not necessarily exclusive] use of the second person, i.e. "you" throughout the sermon).
- Did the preacher's dress, overall appearance, and pulpit manner befit a representative of Christ? Was it obvious to all that the preacher was a "man of God", II Tim. 3:17.
- Did he preach so long that it was beyond his ability to hold the attention of the congregation? Did he preach long enough to accomplish what needed to be accomplished by the message? Did the elements of his sermon serve that purpose or not?
- What kind of congregational response (if any) did you get regarding the message?
- Was the sermon well prepared? Was it obvious that the preacher did not deliver something that cost him nothing, cf. I Chron. 21:24? Could you sense that time, study, prayer, and much thought had gone into the message?
- Were you moved to be changed in some way(s) as a result of the message preached? Why or why not?
- Was this preaching edifying to the congregation? Did it faithfully reflect the doctrinal position of the church? Did it contribute well to the church's testimony as a pillar and ground of the truth, cf. I Tim. 3:15.
- What encouraging words can you give to the preacher about his sermon? What constructive suggestions could you make? Do you need to make them? If so, prayerfully determine how and when, and make them.

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 Fall, 2002

