

The Three-Step System

Biblical Interpretation for Preaching

by Pablo A. Jiménez¹



I have used the Three-Steps System for many years, always receiving great feedback from the students. I hope you find this system useful. It has been developed in dialogue with the writings of Ronald J. Allen, particularly with **Contemporary Biblical Interpretation for Preaching** (Judson Press, 1984) & **Interpreting the**

Gospel: An Introduction to Preaching (Chalice Press, 1998).

I. Point of contact: First Step in the Preparation of Biblical Sermons (Estimated time: 30 -- 45 minutes)

Begin with prayer. Ask God to make you sensible to the Word and to speak through your sermon to the congregation. Keep a devotional atmosphere throughout the exercise.

Read the text several times. Work primarily with the translation that has become part of your own being. Compare it with other translations for the purpose of contrasting emphasis, movement, and structure.

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Some recommended translations are: NRSV, RSV, JB, NIV, TEV and NEB. Do not use secondary sources for this exercise.

Read the text once more, aloud and with feeling. Only then, proceed to answer the following questions.

1. What are the questions that this text sparks?
2. What feelings surface as you read the text?
3. What memories does the text cause you to recall?
4. Imagine that you are immersed in the world of the text:
 - a. What do you see?
 - b. What do you hear?
 - c. What do you smell?
 - d. What do you touch?
 - e. What do you taste?
 - f. How does it feel to be in that world?
5. Has your perception of the text changed? How?
6. What is this text about? List the topics and ideas suggested by the text.

II. Explanation: Second Step in the Preparation of Biblical Sermons (Estimated time: 60-90 minutes)

After a direct interaction with the text, turn to secondary sources such as commentaries, dictionaries, and other homiletic aids. Insofar as possible,

identify the historical context in which the text is found. Then, proceed to answer the following questions.

1. What was the situation of the community to whom the text was written?
2. Identify the form, the function and the literary structure of the text.
3. Note the key words of the text. How are they used in this particular document?
4. Have you found answers to your questions about the text?
5. What are the major theological claims of the text?
6. Enumerate the topics suggested by the text.

III. Interpretation: Third Step in the Preparation of Biblical Sermons (Estimated time: 30-45 minutes)

Move once again to the present, exploring the message of the text for the contemporary Church. Make the hermeneutic movement self-consciously and critically. Then, proceed to answer the following questions.

1. Establish a correlation between your social location and the social location of the text. What realities function in our world in the same way as in the world of the text?
 - a. Identify the salvific elements. Identify the sources of conflict.
 - b. Who is the powerful? Who are powerless?
 - c. In order to interpret the text appropriately, with whom do we should identify with in the text?

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2. Does the function of the text in its ancient setting suggest a possible function for our sermon in our setting?
3. Does the form or the literary structure of the text suggest a given design for the sermon?
4. Does the text suggest any guidelines for contemporary pastoral action?
5. What are the “good news” for the congregation? For the Church at large? For the world?
6. Enumerate the possible “sermons-in-a-sentence” suggested by the text.