

BIG IDEAS

Clarity | Nuts + Bolts

Craig Smith

Craig // Welcome to Clarity, a podcast all about helping you communicate God's Truth with power and... clarity. I'm Craig Smith, the host here at Clarity and I am really honored that you would take a little time out of your day to invest in sharpening the gift of communication that God's given you. I think it's going to be a great investment, because when our message gets clearer, our mission gains momentum. And I know that you aren't communicating just to be heard... you're communicating to change lives, to advance the Gospel and to bring God honor and glory. And all of those things happen more effectively when our preaching gets clearer.

So today is another one of our pre-launch Nuts and Bolts episodes. The full podcast, which will be bringing you interviews with great Christian communicators each month, will launch this Fall, but in the meantime we're bringing you these short, hyper-focused episodes that give you super practical ways to start getting clearer as a communicator.

Today we're going to be talking about what I think is probably the number one most important key to clear communication: having a big idea.

Listen, we preach to change lives, right? But the reality is that lives aren't usually transformed minutes after a message, no matter how great it is. Long term change happens most often in the hours, the days, the weeks or even the months after we've delivered the message...when the Holy Spirit takes truth that we've spoken and applies it in circumstances that you and I could never have envisioned. But here's the thing: typically, for that to happen, what we say has to be remembered.

If the people who hear our messages immediately forget them, there's not much for the Holy Spirit to work with going forward. Now, I know that the Holy Spirit doesn't depend on the clarity of our messages or the memorability of our sermons to be able to do what He does in people's lives. He's God and in no way am I saying that He can't work in people's lives unless we get it just right. Ok? But if you didn't think that the quality of our messages matter at all, then you wouldn't be listening to this podcast, right? I'm guessing that you're like me and you think there's some kind of correlation between the quality of our message and the way God uses it in people's lives. There's some mystery in that, and there are certainly exceptions, but I believe in His gracious decision to call us, gift us and use us as teachers, God often chooses to work more powerfully in people's lives through clear messages that they can remember.

And that's why I believe every message should revolve around a single big idea.

Now of course, no one is going to remember everything we say in a message. If you speak for 30 or 40 minutes, no one's going to remember the specifics of more than a minute or two of what you said. So the question is, if they were only to remember one thing, what would you want that to be? What's the one, indispensable truth that you want them to walk away pondering?

That's your big idea. That's the bullseye...if you can get most of your audience to walk away remembering that one thing, that's a huge win. Because it's better to have them remember one big thing than to have them forget a bunch of small things.

Of course you're going to say a lot more than just that one big idea in your message. But here's the thing: you can make a bunch of essentially independent points, most of which will be forgotten...or you can make a series of points that all combine to lead your audience to the big idea that brings them all together and sums them all up.

So here's what I do: with every message I write, I ask myself, what's the one big idea I want everyone to walk away with. If I had to try to sum up everything I'm trying to say with one single sentence, what would it be?

Sometimes I start with that big idea. Sometimes the exegetical work on the passage leads me to a nice, tight big idea statement right from the beginning. I love when that happens, because it makes developing the message so much easier. The more precisely I know where I'm going, the easier it is to determine each step I need to take to get there. All I have to do at that point is develop the pieces of the message and make sure they're all moving us along towards the big idea.

But it doesn't happen that way every time. Sometimes the exegetical work gives me a general sense of the big idea - I know what God's saying, I'm just not sure how to encapsulate it - and the actual big idea statement doesn't come together until I've written most of the message. But

once I have it, I go back through the message and ask at every step “does what I’m doing here move us towards the big idea?” Does it explain something that will be necessary for my audience to understand in order to grasp the big idea? Does it overcome an objection that someone might otherwise have to the big idea when I give it to them? And so on. So the big idea becomes a kind of razor blade that lets me cut out all the non-essential stuff, which is really useful when we’re trying to craft tight, impactful messages.

And the amazing thing is, if you have a great big idea statement that really is a summary of the whole message, it actually makes the rest of what you say more memorable, because that point you made back at the beginning...it wasn’t a stand-alone point. It was an integral part the journey. So a good big idea not only brings the whole message to a memorable conclusion, it actually makes everything else you said along the way more memorable.

Ok, so how do you create a great big idea?

1. First, make sure it’s a **natural fit** for the passage. Don’t impose something onto a biblical passage that isn’t what the passage is actually talking about. That’s not so much a tip on writing a good big idea as it is a foundation of responsible Bible teaching. It has to be a natural fit for the passage or we’re in danger of saying in the name of God what God never actually said.

2. Second, make it **simple**. Don’t try to get a little piece of every part of your message into the big idea statement. For instance, maybe your’e teaching on David & Goliath and you make the point that that story is really about David and Saul, that it’s a comparison of the two men to show why God is making David the new king. And, along the way, you’re going to talk about where Saul has fallen short and why he should have been the one to fight Goliath. Maybe you make the point that fear can keep us from doing what God has called us to do. And maybe you talk about how David’s experience with fighting off the bear and lion had given him confidence. Maybe you’ve challenged your audience to think back on experiences they’ve had with God that can give them confidence going forward. That’s all great stuff, but when it comes to your big idea, you’re just going to say: God is looking for people of faith, not fear. And see people will not only remember that truth, but they’ll also find themselves going “oh right, Saul was fearful because...” and “David developed faith by...”. So they’re remembering more parts of your message than just the big idea because the big idea gives them a meaningful hook to hang everything else on. So you don’t have to shove everything into your big idea. Keep it simple.

3. Third, Keep it **high-level**. Ideally, there shouldn’t be any part of your message that doesn’t fit naturally underneath the big idea and that requires that it work at the 30,000 foot level a little bit. Again, the big idea isn’t a replacement for all the content of the message...it’s a hook to hang it all on and tie it up in a memorable way.

4. Fourth, Make it **portable**. Give your audience every possible chance to be able to walk out of your church taking that big idea of what the whole message was about with them. Keeping it simple and high-level is critical to this, but beyond that, push in to see if you can make it catchy in some way I’ll be honest, I’m probably guilty of overusing alliteration to do that. I told my congregation the other day, “yeah, I always aspire to alliterate”...and, I know, that’s pretty cheesy...but alliteration gives an idea a huge portability boost. And honestly, I don’t care if people think I’m a little cheesy if it means they’ll remember an important truth from God’s word. That’s a hit I’m willing to take. Rhyming can help too. You don’t want to go overboard, but finish this sentence: I do not like Green Eggs and ham, I do not like them... most of you probably know exactly how to finish that, don’t you? Because it rhymes. Sometimes it’s helpful to tie a big idea to a well-known phrase in some way, something people are already familiar with. Last year I preached a sermon on the importance of telling others about what we’ve seen God do in our lives and the big idea was “so if you see something, say something. If God has worked in your life, give him glory by telling others.” And I told them, hey, I’m straight up ripping off Homeland Security on this, but by tying the big idea to a familiar phrase, it becomes dramatically more portable...able to be carried out of the worship center and out into the world where God can really start to use it in someone’s life.

We could talk about this a lot more, but I think you get the big idea, right? Make every part of your message drive towards one clear, portable statement that sums up the whole thing and people are going to be much more likely to remember and apply that message in their lives.

Like I said, we could talk a lot more about this and we will certainly do that in future episodes, but in the meantime, give it a shot. Make your next message a big idea message and see if it doesn’t have greater impact. And if you have questions about big idea preaching, I would love to hear them. Just shoot your questions to clarity@missionhills.org and I will do my best to answer them directly. And maybe we’ll even use your question for a future Nuts & Bolts Q & A.

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