

## When is The “Big Idea” Too Big?

By Calvin Pearson  
(Preaching, Fall 2024)

Occasionally, we preachers will have a really good main idea. It feels like we hit a homiletical home run. It is joy to preach it. There is unity, progression, tension, and all those benefits of having an effective central idea. But I have often wondered: was I more excited about the passage or what I did with the passage? There is satisfaction in creating a well-crafted sermon and preaching it. But at times, I fear, I am more impressed with my creative words than with God’s inerrant Word.

This maxim of communication is called the big idea, the main idea, the central idea, the thrust, the main proposition, the purpose. At three different seminaries I was taught to have one and for 40 + years I have taught students to struggle to create one that comes from a text and is clear, accurate, interesting, and applicable. To this day I always aim to have one, but do my sights need to be adjusted?

In the article, “Time to Kill the Big Idea? A Fresh Look at Preaching,” Abe Kuruvilla called us to reconsider the importance of a big idea and went so far as to say we do the text a disservice by having one<sup>1</sup>. Russell St. John<sup>2</sup> and Steve Mathewson<sup>3</sup> responded to his objections and convincingly averted the “killing of the big idea”.

But the dialogue has prompted me to re-evaluate how I think about and how I use this communication maxim. Am I placing too much emphasis upon it? I heard that a preaching prof once said that the main idea should be so clear and dominant that it will quiver on the Lord’s supper table. Perhaps that is what Kuruvilla objected to when he called the main idea “the king” to which everything is subject.<sup>4</sup> While I am an advocate of having a main idea, I think we need to be sure that it is used properly. We should use a main idea to preach the text, but placing too much emphasis on it can cause us to inadvertently use the text to preach our idea.

Someone may say that the main idea and the text should be the same, that the idea is a restating of the text. Certainly, the text is the foundation for the idea, but they are not the same. They are different. No one claims inerrancy for a central idea. We need to re-affirm that a main idea is a rhetorical tool used to communicate a passage of scripture. It is a tool to accomplish a task. The command is “preach the Word” not preach the idea.

### **The big idea has not always been as big as it is today.**

Ancient rhetors, such as Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian taught that a speech should have a central idea<sup>5</sup>, though one does not see in their writing a major emphasis placed upon one. From this earliest writing about communication it is clear that God I made our brains desire a central theme. However, these were not out preaching so they didn’t have to deal with the idea coming from a passage of Scripture.

In contrast, Augustine specifically wrote about preaching in his *De Doctrina Christiana*. He echoes the earlier rhetoricians and gives us many good guidelines for hermeneutics and preaching, but it is noteworthy that he doesn’t emphasize a central idea. Perhaps he assumed that the classic rhetors covered that adequately.

From Augustine to the twelfth century, it is difficult to say what the thinking was regarding a central idea because little was written about preaching, except for a few lesser-known preaching

manuals.<sup>6</sup> Robert of Basevorn, (ca.1322) may have been the first to explicitly state that a sermon should have a central idea. He calls for sermons to be built upon “one statement.”<sup>7</sup> While having a central idea has been a rhetorical tool for centuries, it has not been emphasized in the past as much as it is today.

In more recent times a central theme has been explicitly and ubiquitously emphasized. Philip Brooks states that the idea is supreme.<sup>8</sup> Andrew Blackwood exhorts us to have a central purpose, like a marksman aiming at a target.<sup>9</sup> Grady Davis leads the preacher to have a central thought.<sup>10</sup> Haddon Robinson so emphasized it that a book was published about the “Big Idea”<sup>11</sup>, and is written with his teaching in mind.

My favorite exhortation regarding a main Idea comes from J H. h. H. HJowett and is quoted in Robinson’s classic text. He calls us to have a short sentence that “must be clear and lucid as a cloudless moon.”<sup>12</sup> There is a unified acceptance that effective sermons will have a central theme. I have benefited greatly from this line of teaching and teach it in my classroom. So having a central idea in a sermon may not have been emphasized until the late Medieval era, but it is clearly accepted and taught in our modern era.

It should be noted that the concept of a main idea is a construct of rhetoric and homiletics. It accurately describes an effective way to communicate, but it is not direct revelation from God; the Bible is. We need to re-affirm that a main idea is a rhetorical tool used to communicate a divinely inspired message from God’s Word.

### **How to keep the “Big Idea” from being too big.**

To ensure that our Big Idea is not too big:

Be sure the connection between the text and the idea can be clearly seen. In a deductive structure the connection to the text is clear throughout the sermon. With an inductive setting the connection to the text may become clear as the sermon is preached, but it is still clearly based upon and comes out of the text.

Be sure to move from exegesis to homiletics. Start by forming an exegetical idea that leads to a theological focus or a theological idea, which then is shaped into the preaching idea. Remembering each of these ideas is a construct that functions as a tool to aid in communicating the text.

Point our listeners to the text not just to our idea. We should give as much attention to reading the passage as we do to forming our main idea. In conclusion, we will often restate the idea, and we should. Add to that a re-focusing on the passage, perhaps by reading the passage another time, or at least a key verse. Let the last thing we say be Scripture rather than our idea.

Remember to introduce the passage(s) we are preaching and not just the idea. If we are not careful, we prepare the congregation just to hear our idea and not the text. Our listeners need to know, up front, that the Scriptures are the message we are trying to communicate and invite them to listen to the words of God.

Striving for an effective main idea that is clearly from the text is an effective communication tool. May we continue to use this tool, remembering our Lord's command is not to preach our idea, but to preach His Word.

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Kuruvilla, "Time to Kill the Big Idea? A Fresh Look at Preaching. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 61, no. 4 (December 2018), 825-46.

<sup>2</sup> Russell St John, "*Big Ideas. Bad Idea*," *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics* (March 2020), 26-50.

<sup>3</sup> Steven D. Mathewson, "Let the Big Idea Live! A Response to Abraham Kuruvilla," *Evangelical Homiletics Society* 19, no. 1 (March 2019), 33-41.

<sup>4</sup> Kuruvilla, 835.

<sup>5</sup> Kuruvilla, 826.

<sup>6</sup> James J. Murphy, *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts*. University of California Press, 2001, xvii.

<sup>7</sup> Murphy, 140-141.

<sup>8</sup> Books, Philip. *Lectures on Preaching*. Dutton, 1877, 143.

<sup>9</sup> Blackwood, Andrew. *The Preparations of Sermons*, Abingdon, 1948, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Davis, Grady. *Design for Preaching*, Fortress, 1958, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Whillhite, Keith, and Scott M. Gibson, Eds. *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*. Baker. 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Robinson, Haddon. *Biblical Preaching*. Baker. 1980, 35.



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