

Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches

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IX 9Marks Journal



EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING



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Jonathan Leeman

Editor's Note

We create with hands, shovels, and bulldozers. But not God. God creates by speaking. He says, “Be,” and it is. The Psalmist exclaims, “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host” (Ps. 33:6). Invisible words create visible matter.

Just as God created the universe with words, so he re-creates fallen hearts with words. He “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:17).

Nuclear bombs might split or fuse atoms. But they cannot create new-heart atoms out of nothing. Preaching the Bible can, which is why preaching the Bible is central to the life of our churches. Peter says we have been born again through the living and enduring word of God. James says that God brought us forth by the word of truth. Paul teaches that faith comes from hearing. And the apostles learned it from Jesus, who said, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”

The preaching which possesses this greater-than-nuclear power is preaching that exposes the Bible, or expositional preaching. Man’s wisdom does not give new life. God’s Word, accompanied by God’s Spirit, does. It possesses divine power to demolish strongholds and explode hearts of stone.

The present 9Marks Journal lays out some of the basics of expositional preaching as well as a few of the mechanics. If you happen to think that applying the text is the work of the Holy Spirit, start with Michael Lawrence’s piece. There’s a difference between a preacher’s application and the Spirit’s conviction, he says. Preaching that doesn’t apply the text is not preaching, and the ability to apply the text depends on your knowledge of your church. Jared Wilson and Erin Wheeler will help you here.

So critical is the topic of preaching that it’s hard to do it justice (see Matt McCullough’s piece on this). But we hope this Journal educates and edifies. Use it and then entrust it to faithful young men who will be able to teach others also!



By Brad Wheeler

Why Preaching?

This past week I spent about 25 hours preparing our church's Sunday morning message. It was based on 1 Samuel 9-11, so maybe it's better to call it a sermon. During this sermon, I read the whole text, and then spoke for another 40 minutes explaining the meaning and applying it to the hearts those present. So maybe we should call it an expositional sermon. And I don't live in pre-Enlightenment England, nor was it offered in homage to "Puritan Preaching Sunday" on our annual church calendar. Frankly, our senior pastor loathes those annual calendars, but that's for another article . . .

Why spend all this time poring over God's word? And why as a congregation did we devote an hour to my (sometimes painful) monologue? I've been asked such questions before. And I've been gently rebuked by well-meaning friends. They ask things like: Why do you single out preaching over other forms of worship? Doesn't this just reflect your Western prejudice toward rational, reasoned, and orderly discourse? Nobody will remember 95% of what you say anyway. In other words, they say, stop wasting your time—and ours!

However, before you forgo Scripture for the fine arts in your Sunday gathering, let me offer a few reasons why preaching ought to be not only present but primary to the life of your local church.

GOD'S PEOPLE GATHER AROUND THE HEARING OF GOD'S WORD

Believe it or not, I don't naturally want to sit down and listen to someone talk to me. I would rather be motivated through film, energized over a raucous drum solo, or stirred through a moving piece of art. But the consistent pattern in Scripture is that God's people gather around the hearing of God's Word. We are to remain silent, while he speaks.

When God establishes his covenant relationship with his people at the Exodus, he used words and commanded his people gather around and hear those words (Exodus 24:7). While Israel has her enemies on the run heading into the Promised Land, God commands his people to halt and march 20 miles north to the spot of two opposing cliffs. There, with the steep mountains overhead providing a natural amphitheater, "Joshua read all the words of the law—the blessings and the curses— . . . there was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the woman and the children, and the aliens who lived among them" (Joshua 8:34-35).

This is a curious thing to do in the midst of their blitzkrieg through the south, but this is no ordinary war, and these are no ordinary people. The word that created them is the word that defines them. Years later, when Josiah leads his people back to the Lord, he does so by reading "in their hearing the words of the Book of the Covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord" (2 Chronicles 34:30). When all God's people gather as one after the exile, Nehemiah doesn't lead them in a Crossfit routine, a finger-painting exercise, or an extended meditation through the stations of the cross. He has Ezra stand up on a wooden platform (Nehemiah 8.4) and while the people remained in their places (8:7), Ezra and the

scribes “read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (8:8).

Jesus’ public ministry in Luke begins by entering into the synagogue, picking up the scroll of Isaiah, reading it, and teaching from it (Luke 4:14-22). In Acts 2, the people aren’t saved through a gospel blimp or some other gimmick, but through Peter’s public exposition of Joel 2. Deacons were established in Acts 6 not so that the apostles could be freed up to study the latest in drama techniques or hip dress, but so that they would be free to preach the Word of God (Acts 6:2). Paul exhorts Timothy to preach the word (2 Tim 4:2).

I could go on and on. The eye excites, but the ear empowers. We don’t need Tetzels-like skits of heaven’s gates and hell’s flames. God’s people need to gather around the hearing of God’s word.

PREACHING GOD’S WORD TEACHES YOUR PEOPLE HOW TO READ GOD’S WORD

Not long ago David Wells lamented how evangelicals no longer have the courage to be Protestant. Today, we struggle for the courage to be, in any sense, historically Christian. As the cultural tidal wave of gender and sexuality crashes upon us, we don’t have anything to say because we don’t think the Bible finally has anything to say, or we don’t know what it says, or it’s become nothing but a collection of moral stories, a religious version of Aesop’s fables that we get to reinterpret to fit our cultural mores.

But keeping God’s Word central to the life of your local church, especially by preaching through consecutive texts of Scripture, teaches your people how to read the Bible. They don’t need a seminary class on hermeneutics to get this; what they need is faithful preaching. Preaching that connects the power of God’s creative word, the fallenness of the first Adam, the need for sacrifice, the promise of a second Adam and a new Eden. Preaching that connects what God had done through Israel to Jesus and the new Israel of God.

My early Christian life was spent in churches that loved God’s Word, however they did not treat it as a mountain of gold to be mined, but more of a hill with a few scattered rocks we could pick up and observe with passing interest. It was only when I landed in a church that mined the word, carefully connecting rich biblical themes and showing how it all pointed to Christ, that I began to tackle the Old Testament with confidence and encouragement. Keeping God’s Word central in your preaching and teaching will not only help people know how to read it, but it will give them the encouragement to dive into it for themselves.

PREACHING GOD’S WORD IS MEANT TO CHANGE THEIR LIFE, ONE WEEK AT A TIME

What good do all those sermons do, if we proceed to forget most of what we heard shortly thereafter? Well, we don’t forget everything we hear. I trust most of us can remember sermons that challenged how we thought about God, marriage, money, etc.—and we were forever changed. So let’s not write off the whole enterprise. But beyond that, the weekly word in our morning messages is only meant to get us to next Sunday! In God’s weekly rhythm, he seems to grasp that come Sunday, we’re famished, and we need to be filled yet again.

My sermons, your sermons, they don’t have to remain with our people throughout eternity. It’s not meant to change their lives in that sense. They’re meant to sustain them until next week. One week at a time. Until heaven. And there, the word made flesh will dwell with us forever, and the need for sermons will be no more.

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By Mike Gilbert-Smith

Expositional Imposters

Mark Dever rightly describes expositional preaching as “preaching that takes for the point of a sermon the point of a particular passage of Scripture.”

However, I have heard (and preached!) sermons that intend to be expositional, yet fall somewhat short. Below are a dozen pitfalls: five that don’t make the message of the passage the message of the sermon and thus abuse the text, five that fail to connect the text the congregation, and two that fail to recognise that preaching is ultimately God’s work.

None of these observations are original to me. Many I learned at Eden Baptist Church in Cambridge in the mid 90s. Others I’ve picked up along the way. Since writing [a similar article](#) a few years ago, I’ve included some suggestions people made for additions. I’m sure you can think of others.

IMPOSTERS THAT FAIL TO SEE THE TEXT

1) The “Unfounded Sermon”: The Text Is Misunderstood

Here the preacher says things that may be true, but in no sense come from a correct interpretation of the passage. He is careless either with the *content* of the text (e.g. the sermon on “production, prompting, and inspiration” from the NIV of 1 Thessalonians 1:3, though each word has no parallel in the Greek) or with the *context* (e.g. the sermon on David and Goliath, that asks ‘who is your Goliath, and what are the five smooth stones that you need to be prepared to use against him?’).

If a preacher is not deeply mining the truth of God’s Word to determine the message of his sermons, they are likely being driven by his own ideas not God’s.

2) The “Springboard Sermon”: The Point of the Text is Ignored

Closely related is the sermon where the preacher becomes intrigued by something that’s a secondary implication of the text, but is not the main point. Imagine a sermon on the wedding at Cana in John 2 that focuses primarily on the lawfulness of Christians drinking alcohol and said nothing about the display of the New Covenant glory of Christ through the sign of Jesus changing water into wine.

One of the great advantages of sequential expository preaching is that the preacher is forced to preach on topics he would rather avoid, and to give appropriate weight to topics he would tend to overemphasise. A preacher of

“unfounded” or “springboard” sermons can unwittingly jettison both these advantages, and instead God’s agenda is silenced or sidelined.

3) The “Doctrinal Sermon”: The Richness of the Text Is Ignored

God has deliberately spoken to us “in many ways” (Heb 1:1). Too many sermons ignore the literary genre of a passage, and preach narrative, poetry, epistle, and apocalyptic all alike as a series of propositional statements. Whilst all sermons must convey propositional truths, they should not be reduced to them. The literary context of the passages should mean that a sermon from the Song of Songs sounds different than one from Ephesians 5. The passage may have the same central point, but it is conveyed in a different way. The diversity of Scripture is not to be flattened in preaching, but treasured and conveyed in a manner sensitive to the literary genre. Narrative should help us to empathize, poetry should heighten our emotional response, and apocalypse and prophecy should leave us awestruck.

4) The “Shortcut Sermon”: The Biblical Text Is Barely Mentioned

The opposite of the exegetical sermon, this kind of preaching shows no exegetical “working” at all. Though the Lord has set the agenda by his Word, only the preacher is fully aware of that fact. The congregation may well end up saying, “what a wonderful sermon” rather than “what a wonderful passage of Scripture.”

Let’s keep encouraging our congregation to hear God’s voice not just ours, by frequently pointing them back to the text: “look what God says in verse five” more than “listen carefully to what I’m saying now.”

5) The “Christ-less Sermon”: The Sermon Stops Short of the Savior

Jesus castigated the Pharisees: “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40). How sad that even we who *have* come to Jesus to have life would bring a whole congregation to study a passage of Scripture and yet refuse to bring them to see what that Scripture says about Christ, turning Old Testament texts into moralistic sermons, and even preaching Christ-less, gospel-less sermons from the Gospels themselves. Imagine the horror of a sermon on Gethsemane narrative that majored on lessons on how we could handle stress in our lives.

If God’s Word is like a vast wheel, the hub is Christ and the axle is the gospel. We have not faithfully preached any passage of Scripture until we have worked our way down the spokes to the hub, and communicated what the passage says about Christ and how it relates to the gospel.

IMPOSTERS THAT FAIL TO SEE THE CONGREGATION

6) The “Exegetical Sermon”: The Text Remains Unapplied

If the “unfounded sermon” totally misses the text, the “exegetical sermon” totally misses the congregation. Some preaching that claims to be expositional is rejected as boring and irrelevant . . . and rightly so! One could just as well be reading from an exegetical commentary. Everything that is said is true to the passage, but it’s not really preaching; it is merely a lecture. Much might be learned about Paul’s use of the genitive absolute, but little about the character of God or the nature of the human heart. There is no application to anything but the congregation’s minds. True expository preaching will surely first inform the mind, but also warm the heart and constrain the will.

A regular diet of exegetical preaching will make people feel that only topical preaching can be relevant, and will model private Bible reading that presumes we can read God’s Word faithfully and remain unchallenged and unchanged.

7) The “Irrelevant Sermon”: The Text Is Applied to a Different Congregation

Too much preaching promotes pride in the congregation by throwing bricks over the wall toward other people's greenhouses. Either the point of the passage is applied only to non-believers, suggesting that the Word has nothing to say to the church, or it is applied to problems that are rarely seen in the congregation that is being preached to.

Thus the congregation becomes puffed up, and like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable ends up thankful that they are not like others. The response is not repentance and faith but, "If only Mrs. Brown heard this sermon!" or "the local Methodist church really ought to have this sermon preached to them!"

Such preaching will grow the congregation in self-righteousness, not godliness.

8) The "Private Sermon": The Text Is Applied Only to the Preacher

It is easy for the preacher to think merely about how a passage applies to himself, and then to preach to the congregation as if the congregation is entirely in the same situation as the preacher. For me it is certainly easiest to see how a passage of Scripture applies to a white British man in his forties with a wife and six kids who works as a pastor of a small congregation in West London. That may be great for my quiet times, but not much use to my church, as nobody else fits that bill.

What are the implications of the text to the teenager and the single mother? The woman in her forties who'd love to be married and the immigrant? The unemployed and the visiting atheist or Muslim? The congregation as a whole and the bus driver or the office worker or the student or the stay at home mum?

The private sermon can lead to the congregation thinking that the Bible is only relevant to the "professional" Christian, and that the only valid use of their life would really be to work fulltime for a church or other Christian organization. It can cause the congregation to idolize their pastor and live their Christian lives vicariously through him. It robs the congregation of seeing how to apply the Word to every aspect of their own lives, and how to communicate it to those whose lives are quite different from theirs.

9) The "Hypocritical Sermon": The Text Is Applied to All But the Preacher

The opposite error to the "private sermon" is the sermon where the preacher is seen as the one who teaches the Word, but does not model what it means to be under the Word.

There are times when a preacher needs to say "you" and not "we." But a preacher who *always* says "you" and never "we" does not model how he is only an under-shepherd who is first and foremost one of the sheep who must himself hear his great shepherd's voice, who must know him and follow him, trusting him for his eternal life and security.

A preacher who preaches like this may make the opposite error to the congregation who lives vicariously through their pastor: he will live vicariously through this congregation. He will assume that his discipleship is entirely about his ministry, and end up not walking as a disciple under God's Word at all, but only as one who places others under a Word above which he sits aloof.

10) The "Misfit Sermon": The Point of the Passage Is Misapplied to the Present Congregation

Sometimes the hermeneutical gap between the original passage and the present congregation may be misunderstood, so that the application to the original context is wrongly directly transferred to the present context. So, if the preacher does not have a correct biblical theology of worship, passages about the Old Testament temple might be wrongly applied to the New Testament church building, rather than being fulfilled in Christ and his people. Prosperity gospel preachers might claim the promises of physical blessings given to faithful Old Covenant Israel and flatly apply them to the New Covenant people of God.

IMPOSTERS THAT FAIL TO SEE THE LORD

Preaching classes often refer to the two horizons of preaching: the text and the congregation. But the Christian preacher must recognise that behind both stands the Lord who inspired the text and who is at work in the congregation.

11) The “Passionless Sermon”: The Point of the Passage Is Spoken, Not Preached

It would be possible to have a preacher who absolutely understood the passage, and spoke about its implications to the congregation present in apt and even profound ways. Yet the preacher delivers the sermon as if he were reading the telephone directory. There is no sense that, as the preacher delivers God’s Word, God himself is communicating with his people. When the preacher fails to recognize that it is God himself, through his Word, who is pleading, encouraging, rebuking, training, exhorting, moulding, and refining his people through the Spirit’s application of that Word, there will often be no passion, no reverence, no solemnity, no evident joy, no sense of sorrow tears—just words.

12) The “Powerless Sermon”: The Point of the Passage Is Preached Without Prayer

So much time is given to studying the passage and crafting the sermon, that little time is given to prayer either for correct understanding, or for appropriate application.

The preacher who works hard but prays little trusts much in himself and little in the Lord. It is perhaps one of the biggest temptations to fall into as an expositor, for the more discerning in the congregation will be able to spot false exegesis or inadequate application. But the difference that the prayers of the preacher made to the impact of the sermon will only be clear to the Lord and on the day when all things will be revealed. The horizons of the Lord and of eternity must ultimately be more important to the preacher; in fact, he should only really care about the horizons of the text and the congregation because the horizons of the Lord and of eternity are invisible, yet of infinite importance.

CONCLUSION

Expository preaching is so important for the health of the church because it allows the whole counsel of God to be applied to the whole church of God. May the Lord so equip preachers of his Word that his voice may be heard and obeyed.

Editor’s note: This article is a revised and expanded version of an article Mike wrote several years ago.

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By Robert Kinney

What's Your Point?

5 Suggestions for Clearer Sermons

At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison—that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak. (Colossians 4:3-4)

When it comes to his way of declaring the word—or what the rhetoricians called *style* in oratory—it seems that *clarity* was a high priority for Paul.[1] And whether or not he intended that statement to be prescriptive for our preaching, there is something to be learned here.[2]

It's something I need to learn. To be sure, *clarity* is one of the things I have struggled with the most in my own preaching. But, it also seems to me that this is one of the things that a lot of preachers find challenging. Clarity is hard. And it's hard for a lot of reasons. But one key aspect of preaching on which clarity often depends is the articulation of a single main idea or proposition. Of course, *expositional preaching* need not always be propositional in a technical sense. But exposition will always attempt to locate and communicate the point of the biblical passage.

Is this what you are trying to do in your preparation for your sermon each week?

Or might your preaching be pointless?

A PRACTICAL CONCERN FOR CLARITY

There is a serious lack of clarity that comes from having no stated big idea, no point. And it's widespread. This pointless preaching may be the result of the influence of the so-called *New Homiletic*, or the apparent success of many preachers with *narrative preaching*, or the desire of preachers to be creative or build suspense into their sermons, or a much baser desire to simply entertain, or the increasingly shorter attention spans of our people, or any number of other influences. It's easy to get caught up in a good story or want to emphasize the emotion of a text or the beauty of some secondary element. Whatever the cause(s), some of us seem to have moved to a kind of preaching that bypasses the statement of

a main idea, whether deductively or inductively. There's often no coherence of thought that makes a single, memorable point. And our people, sadly, often walk away with no idea what they were supposed to have learned.

It is understandable, in our postmodern age of reader-response approaches to texts and our age's unwavering commitments to self-realization, that the sermon should become a buffet of thoughts from the mind of the preacher—three or four observations from the text, possibly one or two tangents, a few vaguely related applications, a couple good stories or quotations, maybe a nod to the opening illustration to wrap it all up—wherein the congregation simply picks out what sounds good to them and feasts away on that.

As preachers, we think that simply making a *single argument* and then defending it from the text comes across as too rudimentary, too formulaic, or even possibly too legalistic. So, we try to avoid telling our people what we think the main point of the text is. We avoid structuring our sermons as multi-part proofs. We avoid the focus of a single emphasis because we are afraid that we might get it wrong, which would accidentally disclose that we don't know everything. Or worse, we are afraid that our preaching will come across as too *preachy*.

And while there may be some value in avoiding the formulaic (as our people will undoubtedly find the same structure each week tiresome), this haphazard and pointless approach to preaching might be doing our people a disservice. In our being too busy (or lazy?) to arrive at a single point or by trying to conceal it in artistry, by failing to state a clear structure for our sermon, our people—tired, busy, and distracted as they are—will almost always miss the point. Or, more likely, they might simply realize that we did not have a main point in the first place.

CLARITY: UNITY & POINT

The clarity that comes with making a well reasoned argument, culminating in a single proposition, is a key characteristic of ancient rhetoric.[3] This premise is captured in Robert Lewis Dabney's late 19th century lectures on [Sacred Rhetoric](#), which offer meditations on the relationship between ancient oratory and preaching. Importantly, two of Dabney's seven *cardinal requisites* of the sermon focus on this idea of making a single main point.

First, while carefully avoiding reductionism, he suggests that the *unity* of the sermon (his second requisite) results from the combination of all the diverse parts of the sermon, leading to an overall impression for the hearer. As such, the preacher must “have one main subject of discourse, to which he adheres with supreme reference throughout” and he must propose “one definite impression on the hearer's soul, to the making of which everything in the sermon is bent.”[4]

This second requirement, the making of “one definite impression,” seems to be expanded in Dabney's sixth requisite: *point*. “There must be, in order to this, first, a chief truth, practical and important, distinctly apprehended by the speaker in its relation to the action of the soul which he would excite. And the whole matter of the discourse must be so arranged as to make this proposition salient.”[5] Dabney hypothesizes that sermons deficient in *point* either have no valuable Truths within them, or these Truths “are not made to stand out to the apprehension of the hearers.”[6]

SO WHAT? FIVE SUGGESTIONS FOR FINDING CLARITY

If you also struggle with clarity, you might consider a few practical things as you prepare:

1. Have a point.

Expositional preaching is not simply commentary on the text. It is conveying the Truth of the text.[7] As such, it is very much worth arriving in your own mind at a clear, short statement of the big idea of your sermon (which, of course, is going to be derived from the big idea of the text), *and then actually saying it at some point in the sermon*. As Bryan Chapell so clearly notes in his [Christ-Centered Preaching](#): “Listeners quickly tire of chasing ideas and anecdotes across the theological landscape in an effort to discover where their pastor is going.”[8]

2. Show how the point is grounded in the text.

Good exegesis and good theological reflection will reveal to you a clear emphasis in the text. This, if you've worked hard at it, will have given you the big idea for your sermon. But you must clearly show it in the text. Of course, you want your people to have confidence in you, but even more, you want them to have their confidence in the Truth of what you are saying from God's Word. You don't need to be a guru or an expositional magician. The best sermons will be the ones where the people feel like you've simply pointed out what is in the text and let that have its effect on their hearts and minds.

3. Restrain yourself: edit for clarity.

Don't be afraid to trim liberally from your work. One of the fastest ways to achieve clarity in your main theme is to trim away everything that doesn't support it in your presentation. This can be very difficult if you've put a lot of work into your exegesis. You will have learned a lot about your text over the last week and might be quite eloquent on secondary matters. Nevertheless, if you've done the work of narrowing yourself down to a main idea, then don't confuse or distract people with other things, no matter how clever they seem.

4. Restrain yourself: edit for simplicity.

Don't take your people on an exegetical scavenger hunt. The instinct to point your people to the text and to enjoy that moment when they all turn their attention to the Scriptures in front of them is good. But *more* is not always better. The printers of our Bibles have given us thousands of cross-references. Your people don't need to see them all. Don't confuse a multitude of connections with actual support for your argument. If there is a key text, of course have them turn to it. But more than likely, it will be only one or maybe two passages in a sermon. Turn to more than that and you'll likely be in the realm of biblical theology (which can be helpful), but also very possibly at the expense of the point of your passage.

5. Restrain yourself: edit for pithiness.

Preach shorter sermons. Most people are not 50-minute preachers. Even fewer are 60-minute preachers. I've probably never met you, but I feel relatively confident (statistically anyway) in saying that your average sermon length is probably a bit longer than it should be. And even if I am wrong, I am quite confident in saying that your average sermon length is longer than your congregation wants it to be. It takes time and finesse and incredible self-discipline to grow a congregation that enjoys a lengthy, well-reasoned discourse. If you haven't inherited such a congregation or put the years (really decades) into developing one, think about shortening your sermon. At the very least, the act of shortening your sermon will force you to greater clarity and, ideally, a simple and succinct statement of the big idea.

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1 "In regard to style, one of its chief merits may be defined as perspicuity. This is shown by the fact that the speech, if it does not make the meaning clear, will not perform its proper function." Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1404b (LCL, Freese). When ancient rhetoricians considered clarity, or perspicuity, they seem to have mainly focused on the choice of words and whether they would be confusing to the audience. See also Quintilian, *Inst.* 8.1.1-7. This may very well be what Paul had in view in 1 Cor 1:17: "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." For Cicero, clarity also extends to the arrangement of material in support of a primary argument. "An arrangement of the subjects to be mentioned in an argument, when properly made, renders the whole oration clear and intelligible." See Cicero, *Inv.* 1.22. This translation comes from Cicero, *The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, Volume 4 (trans. C.D. Yonge; London: G. Bell & Sons, 1913), 241-306.

2 While much of the point of this article is not precisely arguable as prescription from the New Testament, it's worth noting that much of what I am going to suggest about clarity and making a single, identifiable point with a clear rhetorical structure is observable in the preaching of the Apostles in Acts and the written "preaching" of Paul in his epistles.

3 It would be easy to start with Aristotle in the 4th century BCE and his definition of rhetoric as "the real and apparent means of persuasion." Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.1.14 (LCL, Freese). We could consider the rhetorical handbooks by Cicero and Quintilian, both of which seem to build on the assumption that oratory *is* persuasion. As such, if we are to assume this basic premise of rhetoric for our preaching, then the work of the preacher, indeed the responsibility of the preacher, is to persuade. The clarity that leads to persuasion, for example, requires a particular kind of structure in the speech. And the basic structure of oratory always includes the statement of a single main proposition at the beginning. See [Cicero] *Rhet. Her.* 1.8.11-1.9.16 and Quintilian, *Inst.* 4.4. Oratorical structure also typically includes a restatement of the main point as a peroration at the end. See Cicero, *Inv.* 1.52-56. "What pleasure can an orator hope to produce, or what impression even of the most moderate learning, unless he knows how to fix one point in the minds of the audience by repetition, and another by dwelling on it, how to digress from and return to his theme, to divert the blame from himself and transfer it to another, or to decide what points to omit and what to ignore as negligible? It is qualities such as these that give life and vigour to oratory; without them it lies torpid like a body lacking the breath to stir its limbs." Quintilian, *Inst.* 9.2.4 (LCL, Butler).

4 Robert Lewis Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric* (New York: Anson D.F. Randolph & Co., 1870), 109. Here, Dabney cites Cicero, *De or.* 2.114.

5 Robert Lewis Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric* (New York: Anson D.F. Randolph & Co., 1870), 126.

6 Robert Lewis Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric* (New York: Anson D.F. Randolph & Co., 1870), 127.

7 Consider, for example, the definitions of expository preaching offered by Mark Dever ('a sermon which takes the point of the text as the point of the sermon') or Mike Bullmore ('preaching in which the content and intent of the passage shapes the content and intent of the message'). Exposition, then, isn't merely the content or main point of the text (derived by exegesis and theological reflection). Exposition also demands the simplicity and clarity of presenting the *point* of the text.

8 Bryan Chapell, [*Christ-Centered Preaching, Second Edition*](#) (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 44.



By Mark Vroegop

Is Your Preaching Tone Deaf?

As a husband and father I have learned this lesson the hard way: My tone really matters. It's not enough to say the right words. I have to be very aware of *how* I say things. Several years ago, my wife was sharing a heavy burden with me. After listening for a bit, I quickly began to give her advice on what she should do. However, she looked at me, disheartened. "What's wrong?" I asked. She replied, "Who are you right now? My husband or my counselor?" That was the first clue that I was missing something.

I quickly discovered that while my solutions may have been right, they weren't helpful. Why? Because of my tone. The way I was talking actually undermined my message. As right as I might have been, my tone was getting in the way.

Does this same reality—the importance of tone—pertain to our preaching? Is it possible that how we say something in preaching and teaching is as important to a sermon as it is to marriage, parenting, or any other communication? I would suggest that one's tone in preaching is far more important than we realize. Philip Brooks (1835-1893) famously said that preaching is truth through personality. I would add that preaching is also truth through tone.

A FEW SUGGESTIONS

Let me offer a few suggestions as you think about not just what to say but how to say it.

1. Read the Bible with tone-awareness.

The first step is simply to read the Scriptures with an awareness of its tone. The Bible is more than just a collection of propositional statements. It is truth with tone. And there are many different tones: comfort (2 Cor 1), bluntness (Jam 4:4), lament (Ps 13:1-2), wonder (Rev 4), sarcasm (2 Cor 11:19), instruction (Rom 12), joy (Ex 15), questioning (Ps 22:1), struggle (Lam 3), wisdom (Prov 1), and rest (Psalm 23) to name a few. The beauty of the Bible is found, in part, through its variety of tone.

2. Exegete the tone of the text.

For those of us committed to thoughtful exegesis (which is hopefully everyone), we would do well to also carefully examine the way the author communicates his message. Understanding the tone should never replace careful examination of what the Bible is saying, but a failure to understand how something is said will greatly hinder the communication of the entire message. Put yourself in the seat of the hearers. How would this message be received? What would they hear? This is where reading the Bible out loud is very helpful. It can help us hear something that's missing when the words are only read and studied.

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For instance, the tenderness of Psalm 23 is very different than the tension of lament in Psalm 13. The celebratory tone of the Song of Moses in Exodus 15 is worlds apart from the somber delivery of the 10 Commandments in Exodus 20. Divine sovereignty is personal in John 6 while in Romans 9-11 it is heady and intricate. Genre and tone are vital to the message and application of each text.

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3. Know your pre-disposed tone, and work to balance it.

Since tone is very contextually driven, it's important to consider your "normal" tone. Some teachers and preachers are more intense than others. Some communicators are rather academic while others feel very personable. Knowing this about yourself will help you find balance with the right tone. Intense preachers need to be sure they provide comfort and grace. Academically oriented communicators need to be more personable. Conversational teachers need to be more declarative. Knowing yourself will both allow you to use the right tone and find a tonal balance in your preaching and teaching. A preacher who always uses sarcasm or bluntness can be off-putting or even feel inappropriate. And a preacher who is always comforting or encouraging when the text is more forceful will seem less authoritative. Therefore, prayerfully find ways to balance the tone of your text with the tone you more naturally convey.

4. Know your congregation.

Understanding the history and the challenges of your congregation is vital to finding the proper tone. A church that has been wounded by arrogant leaders will need, for a season, a pastor who preaches truth with much grace. A church that tends toward spiritual pride will need a blunt or direct word in order to break through their hypocritical tendencies. Other churches need to hear the struggle and lament in the tone of the sermon because it gives voice to their painful experiences. A wise pastor will know his text, his tone, and his congregation so that he may faithfully apply the Word of God to them in a way that is heard and received.

5. Use tone to get inside the text.

Using the right tone requires a great deal of wisdom. But if used well, it invites people into a further understanding of the passage and opens up new applications. Preaching with the appropriate tone helps people feel the weight of what is being said. It makes the passage come alive in new ways. It can open their heart to truths that may have been missed without the right tone. By using the right tone, you will help people hear the truth of God's Word. Truth through tone is a powerful way for both the pastor and the congregation to walk together into what is being said in the Bible, and a proper tone allows a person to not just know what's in a particular passage, but to *feel* it.

CONCLUSION

The right tone opens a door and adds flesh and form to a message. The right tone can make truth vivid and deeply felt. On the other hand, using the wrong tone can needlessly offend people, obscure meaning, and hinder the application from the text. What's more, consistently using the same tone regardless of the passage will, over time, flatten the Bible to your congregation, which will clog their ears and inevitably cause some kind of spiritual deficiency.

As it turns out, preaching and teaching are not any different from other forms of communication that require careful attention to tone. How we preach and how we declare the truth of God's Word matters. Therefore, effective preaching is not tone deaf. Rather, it's the truth of the Word coupled with a right tone.

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By David King

A Gospel-Centered Sermon Is a Gospel-Shining Sermon

Does *The Princess Bride* qualify as a classic movie? If memorable lines count for anything, absolutely! One of the classic lines is spoken by the beloved Inigo Montoya, who is confused by Vizzini's repeated exclamation: "Inconceivable!" Montoya finally replies, "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

When I consider the often-repeated descriptor of preaching as "gospel-centered," I hear Inigo Montoya. We keep using that word, and I do not think it means what we think it means. So, come now, let us reason together.

DENIALS ABOUT GOSPEL-CENTERED PREACHING

A short list of denials may help to sharpen the boundaries of our understanding:

It should be denied that preaching is gospel-centered merely because the sermon was based on the Bible. There is a way of preaching the Bible—even verse-by-verse, even the parts about Jesus—that is damning. The priests and Levites were masters of Scripture, yet Jesus rebuked them for having missed its Christocentric witness (John 5:39-40).

It should be denied that preaching is gospel-centered merely because the sermon comforted people with grace. Gospel grace not only comforts but compels. It justifies and sanctifies. It grounds us in indicatives and grows us with imperatives: *You are forgiven; now go and sin no more.*

It should be denied that preaching is gospel-centered merely because the sermon included a reference to Jesus' death and resurrection for sinners. Certainly Jesus' death and resurrection for sinners is the core of the gospel message (1 Cor. 15:1-4). Yet a dutiful summary of that message, as if it were an item on a checklist or an obligatory footnote—surely that is not what we mean by gospel-centered preaching.

AN IMAGE OF GOSPEL-CENTRALITY

The word "centered" is one of the culprits of our confusion. What exactly does "centered" mean in relation to preaching the good news of Jesus? Let me suggest an image. We should desire for the gospel to be central to our sermons the way the sun is central to our solar system. In our solar system, everything circles the sun and is brightened and warmed

by it. The sun's enormous mass creates a gravitational pull that holds the entire system together. The sun's radiant light and heat reaches every object in its orbit.

So it should be with the gospel in our sermons. Christ the Savior is the sun, and the Bible is the solar system. Every passage, every doctrine, every theme—all of it orbits the saving work of Jesus. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection brighten and warm the whole of God's revelation, as well as the people in the pews and the preacher himself. The degree to which a sermon reflects these realities is the degree to which a sermon is centered on the gospel.

In a gospel-centered sermon, the gospel is like the sun, pulling every facet of the preaching event into its orbit, radiating light and heat on it all. A gospel-centered sermon is a gospel-shining sermon.

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS

Comparing preaching to our sun-centered solar system is imaginatively helpful, but we need to get a little more practical. Is there a way to evaluate how well we have done in centering a sermon on the gospel? What follows are three diagnostic questions that can help us evaluate our sermons. These questions, essentially, are affirmations in contrast to our earlier denials.

1. Did the gospel shine like the sun upon the text of the sermon?

The main point of the text was proclaimed in light of the gospel. Whether having to do with creation, gender, covenant, temple, sacrifice, holiness, judgment, blessing, curse, purity, prayer, marriage, singleness, unity, justice, mission, Father, Spirit, whatever—the main point of the text was preached with a clear grasp of how the death and resurrection of Jesus fulfills it or reshapes it or enables it or empowers it. In short, the main point of the text was seen in clear relation to the saving work of Jesus. No truly gospel-centered sermon would be met with approval in a synagogue or a mosque.

2. Did the gospel shine like the sun upon the life of the hearer?

The gospel illuminated not only the text's point but the hearer's life. Gospel-centrality shone on both interpretation and application. People were called to live in response to the gospel. In light of the grace of God in Christ, unbelievers were urged to repent and believe and be saved. In light of the grace of God in Christ, believers were encouraged to put off their old self, to be renewed in their minds, and to put on the new self. The life-transforming light of grace shines in a truly gospel-centered sermon. Gospel-imperatives arise from gospel-indicatives, and neither should be neglected.

(3) Did the gospel shine like the sun upon the heart of the preacher?

An honorable mention of the gospel is far better than no mention of the gospel at all. However, in a truly gospel-centered sermon, the preacher himself has been gripped by the gospel implications of the text. He himself has seen the light and felt the warmth of the sun, and so he stands before the congregation feeling less like Pluto and more like Mercury. He himself is exulting in Christ. Consequently, the preacher is earnest in his desire for the congregation to join him in his joy. He proclaims the gospel not as a lede to be buried but as headline news.

INCONCEIVABLE!

This is gospel-centered preaching at its best: preaching in which the gospel shines like the sun from the text, on the hearers, and in the preacher. The only thing inconceivable is that gospel-centrality would be defined in lesser terms. So ponder the denials. Run the diagnostics. And learn to preach the gospel like the sun rising “from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat” (Psalm 19:6). A gospel-centered sermon is a gospel-shining sermon.

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By Peter Sanlon

Has Preaching Changed Since the Early Church?

Regular systematic expository preaching of Scripture takes central place in my vision for normal church ministry. As I preach through Bible book after Bible book with my congregations, I believe I am continuing a craft and tradition that has roots in the Pentateuch, Jewish teaching methods, and the Apostolic Church. Space does not permit us to elucidate the nature of these first flowerings of expository preaching; I have been asked instead to share reflections on the nature of our indebtedness to the preaching of the post-biblical Early Church.

Early Church preachers I look to as master craftsmen include Ambrose, Jerome, Gregory of Nazianzus, Chrysostom, Athanasius, Augustine, and Peter Chrysologus. However, when I read the sermons of these practitioners of expository preaching, I cannot help but notice that their preaching appears rather alien to what is today thought of as expository. How can modern expository preaching be dependent upon Early Church preaching that seems so alien to us?

SHARED CONVICTION BETWEEN ANCIENT & MODERN

First, it is vital to give due weight to the shared conviction that we and patristic preachers hold in common. Ancient and contemporary practitioners of expository preaching alike have believed that Scripture is true in all its states. Furthermore, they both have held that when the Bible is preached, God himself speaks.

In many places the Fathers, such as Tertullian, stated that whatever Scripture teaches is true.^[1] Augustine also declared, “I have learned to yield this respect and honour only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error.”^[2] Such explicit affirmations of the Bible’s trustworthiness are valuable in reconstructing the patristic view of Scripture.

However, at least as relevant are the implications that may be drawn from the actual use made of Scripture throughout the vast corpus of the Church Fathers. Preaching was the main place that the Bible was used in the Early Church, and when citation after citation is piled upon quote after quote, it becomes abundantly clear that ancient preachers handled Scripture as they did because they believed that it was true, and through it God addresses listeners.

As Augustine preached, “Let us treat Scripture like Scripture: like God speaking.”^[3] Without such a conviction there is little motivation to pore over the biblical text in sermon preparation, as the Fathers did.

Why then do sermons from the Early Church read so differently than modern Western preachers who share the same commitment to Scripture's role in God speaking? Patristic sermons often utilise obscure allegories, assume significance in numbers, and can leap around the Bible in apparently random fashion. Patristic sermons can contain reflections and excursions that seemingly diverge a long way from the text apparently under consideration. Is the idea that modern expository preaching is the descendent of such ancient homilies merely wishful thinking?

EXPOSITORY PREACHING INTERFACES WITH PAGAN CULTURE

Expository preaching is a craft, art, and pastoral discipline which interacts with pagan culture in general, and pagan oratory in particular.

Patristic preachers (and contemporary preachers) committed to expository preaching take radically divergent views of pagan scholarship. Some preachers wove quotations from pagan authors into the fabric of their expositions. For example, Ambrose has over a hundred quotes from Virgil in his extant sermons, and used the medical writer Galen to help him explain Genesis. Tertullian decried pagan learning as inimical to theology. That his style of speaking utilised rhetorical techniques forged in pagan schools reminds us that nobody can entirely escape their context.

The frequency of citations from pagan authors is only the most obvious way pagan learning influenced patristic sermons. At a deeper level, the pagan culture of the ancient world was one fascinated by words—their meaning, formation, and significance. The sermonic piling of Bible quotation upon quotation, and the use of clear Bible passages to interpret more obscure passages, were techniques preachers learned from pagan schools' handling of Homer.

As at the Reformation, the educational background of patristic preachers shaped their ministries in deep ways. The first manual on learning to preach was written by Augustine. It contained extensive sections reflecting on how best to appropriate lessons of oratory from Cicero. Augustine saw value in pagan insights to speaking well: "Why should those who speak truth do so as if they are stupid, dull, and half-asleep?"^[4] Despite commending some lessons from Cicero, in the end Augustine thought prayer and listening to good preachers more important.^[5]

Much of that which makes patristic sermons seem different to modern sermons arises from the fact that, in our ministries of expository preaching, we and our forebears are (wittingly or unwittingly) using the best of our available pagan insights to hermeneutics and communication. Ancient preachers believed the Bible to be a divine word of rich truth for listeners. They sought meaning in patterns of numbers because the pagan culture was one which saw beauty, truth, and meaning residing in hidden depths of numbers. If it was so for mathematics, persuasive speeches, and philosophy, they thought, surely it must be all the more so for a text inspired by God himself. The context of secular learning shaped ancient preachers' approaches to their craft.

The same is true when it came to practical matters of preaching. Some preachers wrote their sermons out in full and read them. Others, such as Augustine, meditated on the passage during the week then spoke extemporaneously. Many schools of rhetoric taught students to speak in public by making them read and memorise speeches. Quintilian, a pagan orator, argued that this was a facile and immature way to speak in public. Whether a preacher agreed with Quintilian or not shaped his practice as regards speaking from a script.

It would be a grave error to assume that our modern approaches to understanding and preaching the Bible are automatically superior to those of ancient preachers. It would also be incorrect to miss the fact that modern expository preaching is a descendent of patristic homiletics and shares its fundamental convictions.

EXPOSITORY PREACHING DEVELOPS WITH CHURCH HISTORY

Another reason that patristic sermons appear so unique is that they were preached by people from within the context of church history they inhabited. In the ancient world, some preachers benefited from the cross referencing of translations

begun by Origen in his *Hexapla*. Augustine wrestled with whether he should adopt Jerome's more scholarly Bible translation, or stick with the version his congregation was more familiar with. He opted to keep the less accurate translation for his congregation out of pastoral sensitivity, while slowly integrating Jerome's translation into his academic writings.

As church history progressed, so the tools and form of expository preaching developed. One of the most obvious areas where this applied was that of salvation history. In the early church, preachers were very aware that there was development within the Bible story. Irenaeus developed a theology of "recapitulation" based on perceived repetitions within salvation history such as the tree in Genesis 2 and the tree Christ hung on. Marcion's heretical rejection of the Old Testament and interactions with Jewish scholars led many preachers to preach about the similarity and unity between the Testaments. Augustine's emphasis upon grace in the Pelagian controversy led him to emphasise the difference between law and gospel. All of these—and the seemingly ubiquitous practice of allegory—were early attempts by preachers to engage with scriptural passages in a way that did justice to the entirety of salvation history.

Given the many developments in church history that offer us fresh ways to nuance and articulate salvation history, it is understandable that patristic sermons can appear quite alien in their theological interpretations. In reality, the great preachers of the early centuries were charting the possibilities for configuring unity and diversity within the canon—something we today still wrestle with and differ over.

CONCLUSION

Has expository preaching changed since the Early Church? To the extent that expository preaching must interface with pagan culture and must develop with church history, the answer is yes. Were this to blind us to the core shared convictions about scripture's authority, and the passion that drives preachers to use the best material we can access in culture and theology to preach the Bible faithfully, we would not only dishonour the saints who have toiled before us, we would disinherit ourselves of a treasure that can help us improve our preaching—the preaching of the Early Church.

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1 Tertullian, *Flesh of Christ*, 6.

2 Augustine, *Epistle* 82.3.

3 Augustine, *Sermon* 162C.15.

4 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, 4.3.

5 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, 4.32.



By Jared C. Wilson

Why Knowing Your Flock Is Critical to Meaningful Preaching

The preacher paced the stage, staring earnestly out into the congregation. It was time for his weekly invitation. He asked for respondents to raise their hands. Not a single hand was raised. But he had no way of knowing this because he was on a video screen.

I found myself at the nearest campus of this multisite church on assignment from the pastor himself, a man who had recently hired me to do some freelance research work for him. Visiting one of his many remote services was supposed to help me get a “feel” for his ministry. It certainly did. But I couldn’t help but be struck with the feeling that this way of doing ministry couldn’t really help the preacher get a “feel” for his congregation.

I don’t know what you think about video venues or the multi-site model of church growth in general, but this experience and others has only affirmed some of the concerns I have about the disconnect between preacher and flock, a growing dilemma in all kinds of churches, big and small.

Indeed, this dilemma isn’t merely limited to multi-site, “video venue” churches. Pastors of growing churches of all sizes will continually struggle with staying familiar with their congregations. And the temptation to become more and more isolated becomes greater as more complexity is added to an increasing church.

And of course, it’s impossible for a preacher of even a small church to be best friends with everybody in his church, and it’s impossible for preachers of larger churches to know everybody well. But the preacher whose ministry is becoming more and more about preaching and less and less about shepherding, the preacher who is becoming less and less involved with his congregation, is actually undermining the task to which he is trying to devote more of his time! Good preaching requires up-close shepherding.

The ministry of preaching cannot be divorced from the ministry of soul care; in fact, preaching is actually an extension of soul care. There are a host of reasons why it is important for pastors who want to preach meaningfully to know their flocks as well as they can, but here are three of the *most* important.

1. Meaningful preaching has people’s idols in mind.

As I travel to preach in church services and conferences, one of the first questions I usually ask the pastor who invited me is “What are your people’s idols?” I want to be able not to just drop in and “do my thing,” but to serve this pastor and his congregation by speaking as well as I can to any of the hopes and dreams he can identify within his church that are not devotionally attached to Christ as their greatest satisfaction. Sadly, some pastors don’t know how to answer the question.

When Paul walked into Athens, he saw that the city was full of idols (Acts 17:16). That said, he didn’t simply regard this as a philosophical problem but as a spiritual problem that grieved him personally. And when he addressed it, he did so specifically, referencing their devotion to “the unknown god” (17:23). And whenever Paul addressed specific churches in his letters, you will see that the kinds of sins and falsehoods he addressed were very specific. He didn’t speak in generalizations. He knew what was going on in these churches.

This doesn’t mean, of course, that you begin embarrassing or exposing people from the pulpit. But it does mean that you are in the thick of congregational life enough to speak in familiar terms.

Until a pastor has spent quality time with people in his congregation, the idols his preaching must combat with the gospel will be merely theoretical. All human beings have a few universal idols in common. But communities where churches are located, congregations as a subculture themselves, and even specific cliques and demographics within congregations tend to traffic in more specific idols and patterns of sin.

Knowing firsthand your flock’s misguided financial, career, and familial hopes will help you know how to preach. It will help you pick the right texts and the right emphases in explicating those texts. This is what makes preaching a ministry, and not simply an exercise.

2. Meaningful preaching has people’s suffering in heart.

I can tell you firsthand that my preaching changed after I’d begun holding people’s hands while they died and hearing people’s hearts while they cried. Until you’ve heard enough people share their sins and fears and worries and wounds, your preaching can be excellent and passionate, but it will not be all that it can be—*resonant*.

Many preachers carry the burden of God’s Word into the pulpit, and this is a good thing. Receiving the heavy mantle of preaching hot with Christ’s glory, being burdened to proclaim the Lord’s favor in the gospel is a noble, worthy, wonderful task. But the preacher must also feel the weight of his people in that pulpit. He must ascend to preach having been in the valley with them. His manuscript should be smudged with the tears of his people.

Knowing what sufferings afflict his people on a regular basis will keep a preacher from becoming tone-deaf to his congregation. He won’t be lighthearted in the wrong places. It will affect the kinds of illustrations he uses, the types of stories he tells, and—most importantly—the dispositions with which he handles the Word. I have seen preachers make jokes about things people in his congregation were actually struggling with. And I’ve been that preacher. We come to lift burdens, but with our careless words we end up adding to them.

Preacher, do you have a genuine heart for your people? I don’t mean “Are you a people person?” I mean, do you know what is going on in the lives of your congregation, and does it move you, grieve you? Have you wept with those who weep? If not, your preaching over time will show it.

Think of Moses’ grief over his people sins (Exodus 32:32). Or of Paul’s abundant tears (Acts 20:31, 2 Corinthians 2:4, Philippians 3:18, 2 Timothy 1:4). Think, also, of Christ’s compassion, seeing into the hearts of the people (Matthew 9:36). You may believe you can work these feelings up without really knowing your congregation, but it isn’t the same, especially not for them. It’s not the same for them in the same way that hearing a stirring word from a role model is not the same as hearing a stirring word from your dad. Preacher, don’t take to your text without carrying the real burdens of your people in your heart.

3. Meaningful preaching has people's names in prayer.

Every faithful preacher prays over their sermon. They pray that God's Word will not return void (Isaiah 55:11). They pray that people will be receptive. They pray that souls will be saved and lives will be changed. These are good prayers. Better still is the sermon prepped and composed with prayers of John Smith and Julie Thompson and the Cunningham family on the lips of the preacher. Better still is the sermon prayed over in pleadings for Tom Johnson's salvation and Bill Lewis's repentance and Mary Alice's healing.

Paul repeatedly tells the people under his care that he is remembering them in his prayers (Ephesians 1:6, 2 Timothy 1:3, Philemon 1:4). And since he is frequently naming names, we know he doesn't just mean *generally*. And while Paul did not have one congregation to shepherd up close but rather served largely as a missionary church planter, he nevertheless worked hard to know the people he ministered to from a distance and sought to visit them as often as he could. How much more should the local church pastor develop relationships with his people! He should know their names and he should carry their names to heaven in prayer.

It is important to know who you're preaching to. It's important to know that Sister So-and-So doesn't like your preaching. It's important to know that Brother Puff-You-Up likes it too much. It's important to know that the man in the back with his arms folded and his brow furrowed isn't actually mad at you—that's just how he listens. It's important to know that the smiling, nodding lady near the front has a tendency not to remember anything you've said. When you know these things, you can pray for your people in deeper, more personal, more *pastoral* ways. And your preaching will get better. It will be more real. It will come not just from your mind and mouth, but from your heart, your soul, your guts.

This all assumes, of course, that you are interested in this kind of preaching. If you see preaching as simply providing a "spiritual resource" for interested minds or a pep talk for the religiously inclined and not as bearing prophetic witness from the revealed Word of God to the hearts of people, then you can safely ignore all the points above..

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By Michael Lawrence

No Application? Then You Haven't Preached

Did you ever sit in a classroom wondering what the point was? I distinctly remember that feeling as I struggled through calculus in college. The course was taught as if the application of the principles was self-evident. And perhaps to the math geeks in the class it was. But to this English lit major, it was a constant, and losing, exercise in purely abstract thinking. Without understanding the real world application, I had a hard time grasping why I needed to know the value of anything as it approached, but never quite reached, infinity.

And if you were a math whiz, just recall how you felt being asked to discuss the meaning of one of Shakespeare's sonnets.

EXPLANATION ≠ APPLICATION

I'm not trying to dredge up bad memories. But I wonder if some of us preachers aren't guilty of putting our church members in the spiritual equivalent of freshman calculus or composition every Sunday? Like many teachers in many fields, we're passionate about our subject and extremely well prepared. We can answer questions about Greek and Hebrew verb tense and the historical and cultural backgrounds of the ancient Near East. We can point out a chiasm before our people can figure out how to say the word. And we're prepared to explain why the learned translators got it wrong and they should go with our reading instead.

And yet for all this wealth of knowledge and understanding, passionately delivered as of the greatest import, our congregation is left with little understanding of what they should *do* with it. They know it's important—because it's God's word. More than that, they know it's supposed to be God's word *for them*. But having explained it, we essentially say to them, "Over to you. You'll have to figure out how to apply this on your own." Or worse, we leave people feeling a little embarrassed and unspiritual for not knowing how to apply it, since it clearly seems so obvious to us.

It's simply not enough for us as preachers to explain the text to our congregation. If we're going to be good shepherds, we have to apply the text to their lives today.

So why don't we? I can think of several reasons.

First, application is hard work. Compared to thinking through the complexity of the human heart and condition, analyzing grammar and context is child's play.

Second, application is subjective. I know when I've outlined a sentence correctly, or parsed a verb. But how can I know that I've got the application right?

Third, application is complex. The text has a main point. But there are scores of applications, maybe as many as there are listeners. Sorting through the myriad options is daunting.

Fourth, application is personal. As soon as I start thinking about how a text applies to my congregation, I can't help but be faced with how that text applies to me. And sometimes, I'd rather just explain it than deal with it.

All of these reasons have to do with our own flesh, and our desire to either avoid hard work we're not good at, or avoid personal conviction altogether. And so our response to these excuses is simply to repent.

APPLICATION ≠ CONVICTION

But there's a fifth, more theological reason some of us neglect application in our sermons. We're convinced application is someone else's job and ultimately beyond our pay grade. Isn't it the Holy Spirit who must finally apply the text to a person's heart? If I apply it, and it doesn't apply, haven't I let people off the hook? But if I put the truth out there, and then get out of the way, then the Holy Spirit has a clear field to do his work. And he'll do it far better than I could anyway.

I've heard more than one highly esteemed modern preacher make this point. But with all due respect, I think the objection is both unbiblical and theologically confused. The confusion is to mistake conviction for application. Conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment is the Holy Spirit's job (John 16:8). No one but the Holy Spirit can bring true conviction, and when we try to do his job for him, we inevitably stoop to legalism. Why? Because conviction is a matter of the heart, in which a person is convinced not only that something is true, but also that they are accountable to God for that truth and must act on it.

Application is different from conviction. Though its goal is the heart, it's aimed at the understanding. If exegesis requires us to understand the original context of the text, application is all about exploring the contemporary context in which that text is heard. It's about identifying categories of life, ethics, and understanding in which this particular word of Christ needs to dwell richly (Col 3:16). We all tend to listen through our own filters and out of our own experience. So when a pastor labors to apply the Word, there's an opportunity for us to consider the significance of a passage in ways that we might not have before, or might not naturally consider.

So, for example, whenever I hear John 3:16, I immediately think about my calling to evangelism. That's my natural, almost reflexive personal application of the verse. But careful homiletic application might cause me to think more deeply about the nature of God's love for me, or what it means that in Christ I have eternal life. By expanding my understanding of the possible applications from that single verse, John 3:16 begins to dwell much more richly in my life. Far from trespassing on the Holy Spirit's work, good application multiplies the opportunities for conviction.

AVOIDING APPLICATION IS UNBIBLICAL

Avoiding application is also quite simply unbiblical. Application is precisely what we see the preachers and teachers of God's word doing on the pages of Scripture. From Deuteronomy 6:7—where parents are told to “impress [these commandments] on your children”—to Nehemiah 8:8—where Ezra and the Levites not only read the Book of the Law to the people but labored “making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read”—the Old Testament is concerned that God's people not only *knew* his Word, but understood its significance for their lives.

And this concern was continued in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. In Luke 8:21, Jesus affirms his relationship with those who “hear God's word and put it into practice” and his teaching is replete with what it looked like to put that

word into practice, beginning with the Sermon on the Mount. The apostles' letters are filled with practical application, and they passed that concern on to elders, who were to teach practical godliness (1 Timothy 4) and entrust that same teaching "to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (1 Timothy 2:2).

Nowhere do we see this more clearly than in Ephesians 4:12-13. The purpose of Christ's gift of pastors and teachers to the church is "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the entire body of Christ may be built up." How can we equip church members for their various ministries inside the church and out, if we never speak specifically and practically to that end? Paul seems to assume that far from avoiding application, it's where we're constantly aiming.

A FEW EXAMPLES

So what might this look like practically? Let me offer two examples. First, consider 2 Samuel 11, the narrative of David's adultery with Bathsheba and then abuse of power to conspire to commit murder and cover up his sin. Obviously, the applications about sexual purity and murder sit right on the surface of the text. But what about all the people in your congregation for whom adultery and murder aren't current temptations? I'm sure there are a few. Is there nothing else to say to them? Of course there is.

Looking at David's specific sin, you can help them see the pattern of sin in general, its deceptive, opportunistic, and progressive nature. Then you can help them think through the "sins of opportunity" that they face, not as King of Israel, but as moms and grandmoms, college students and office workers, managers and retirees. In your application, you're not trying to be exhaustive. You're trying to give them the sense of the passage and get the wheels turning in their minds about their own lives.

Or consider Ephesians 6:1-4. This is a passage all about the mutual obligations of parents and children to one another. And there's plenty of application right there. But what about all the people in your church who don't have children, or no longer have children at home? Do they just have to listen in, and hope to learn something so they can encourage the parents around them? That's a start. But this is God's Word for them, too. The principle of authority rightly exercised and submitted to is applicable to all of us. Teachers and students, employers and employees, elders and congregation all have something to learn about what it means to prosper through and under godly authority. As the Westminster Larger Catechism observes, "in the fifth commandment are meant, not only natural parents, but all superiors in age and gifts; and especially such as, by God's ordinance, are over us in place of authority" (Answer 124). All of us are under authority somewhere, and most of us exercise authority somewhere. Thoughtful application will help make that clear.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

What all of this means, I think, is that a sermon unapplied is no sermon at all, but merely a Bible lecture. We don't want people walking out of our lectures wondering what the point was. Instead, let's give ourselves to applying the text, that "the body of Christ might be built up . . . attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

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By Erin Wheeler

Preaching to Women: Things for a Pastor to Consider

Over the past 37 years as a believer I've warmed many a church chair with my soul aching for the truth of God's Word to make it's way to me, a female, a person made in the image of God. Like many of my fellow lady friends, I've weathered various seasons of life. I've been a young girl standing alone for Christ at school; a teenager struggling to understand my identity in Christ in a hostile world; a college student and young professional wrestling to make sense of my identity outside my Christian upbringing; a young married woman feeling lonely and confused; an exhausted new mom fighting to stay awake. Now, I'm a needy mom of young people—and I'm still desperate for the Scriptures to be opened and explained. Like Mary in Luke 10:39, I come every Sunday to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen. But will I hear? Can I hear?

Like all Christians, I need the ammunition of the gospel for another week of battle in this hostile world. So, to you pastors, expositors of the Word of God, remember us!

Remember the women made in God's image as you labor by the hour to apply the words of Scripture to your congregation. After all, male or female, we all need the gospel. The cross is central to everything. We all need the Word preached, and we need theology for our everyday lives. At the core, our issues are all the same: we are sinners in need a Savior, in need of the cross. If you're a pastor reading this, you know this to be true. You know there's a famine of God's Word in pulpits around the world today.

So, when you step into your pulpit this Sunday, chances are you'll be preaching predominantly to women. But are you reaching them? Are their lives changing to look more like Christ? As women, would they tell you they feel fed by your preaching? The first rule of public speaking is, "Know your audience." Well, do you? As preachers, you need to take the time to ask, to listen, and to respond to the women to whom you preach.

ASK

First, begin by asking. Get to know the women of your congregation and your community. Your wife, should you have one, is always a great place to start (and do start there as she is a unique gift given to you by God). She can give you valuable insights into the women she is discipling, ministering to, and coming into contact with more regularly.

However, she's only one woman with one set of values, experiences, and friends. So don't stop with her, but draw from a broad range of women. They can be women on your staff, ladies your family ministers to out of your home, or young

women who come for counseling. They should be young and old, in the workplace and at home, married and single. Get to know them in safe and appropriate ways and make a point to consistently ask them questions.

Ask them what they are struggling with, how they feel valued, what issues they are facing in the workplace/school, what attributes of God they find challenging in the season of life in which they find themselves. Ask clear, straightforward, and specific questions so that you can better understand what it is these women are telling you. What is life like for them as a female image bearer today? Seek to better understand their world. This is exactly what Jesus did in the incarnation. He entered into our world. Enter into theirs. May church be a place for them to find refuge from the heat and lies of the world we live in today.

LISTEN

It does no good if you only ask and never listen. Sympathy comes through listening and learning, and after a while, you'll hear themes and see patterns. Our culture shapes our ideas, knowledge, values, and feelings. As the historian Anne Firor Scott has said, our culture grinds the lens through which we view reality. What do the lenses look like for the women to whom you preach? What is their reality?

Be mindful of the current wave of cultural struggles faced by women today. The cultural push for full functional equality is blurring the lines of gender, and placing a Titus 2 model for women in opposition to all that is currently held sacred. We are told everyday through ads and media that we're a sell-out if we choose to stay home. Or, we're a sell out if we choose not to rise up the corporate ladder for the good of the home. But a word of caution will be worthwhile here: As you listen, be careful of gender stereotyping. We are all women, but we are not all the same. Practicing the art of good listening will help you see variation, and it will help you better respond to the diverse kinds of women in your pastoral care, *especially* in your preaching.

RESPOND

The truth of God's Word speaks into everything in our lives. As a minister of the Word, you have a unique privilege and responsibility to help your people see that when you preach the word of God every week. As you think through illustrations and applications, stop and ask yourself, "Is this a male-dominated idea?" "Will many of the women I know understand what it is I'm trying to say to them?" "There's nothing wrong with using a football or cooking illustration, but if that's the breadth of scope you have, it's time to go back to the drawing board and pray for God to give you fresh vision in illustrating and applying the truths of his Word to both your male and female hearers. Again, be careful of stereotyping. Some men hate football, and some women hate to cook.

As you prepare the text to preach this next week, take time to pray through your church directory. If you don't have one of those, find some other systematic way to pray through a varied group of your church's members. As you glance over the names of different women in various stages of life, stop and ask yourself, "Why does _____ need to hear this passage?" If you've been listening well, you'll be able to better answer that question and thus able to better apply the context of the passage to the hearts of your women hearers. Ask yourself: How I can admonish the idle "Clara," encourage the fainthearted "Roxanne," help the overbearing "Lucy," and be patient with women entrusted to my care? (1 Thess 5:14)

WE WANT TO BE REMEMBERED

As women, we do not want to be catered to in your preaching. We just want to be remembered. We need someone to hold out heaven to us every week and remind us what lies ahead. We need someone to help us peel our eyes off ourselves and onto our Savior. We need someone to encourage us in our neediness, reminding us that when we are failed by someone leading us here on this earth, there is one who will never fail us, leave us, or forsake us. As women, we were created to be helpers and followers, but we need someone worth following. So whether we arrive as a Mary or a

Martha in the pew this Sunday, we need faithful preachers of the Word to ask us, listen to us, and then respond to us in their preaching through thoughtful, specific, and Christ-exalting application.

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By Jason Dees

You Aren't as Smart as You Think You Are . . . So Manuscript Your Sermons

If you've read even a few of the many books and articles on sermon preparation, then you've probably read the adage that says, "Think yourself empty; read yourself full; write yourself clear; pray yourself hot; and let yourself go." This phrase has been attributed to Alistair Begg, John MacArthur, and others. But it actually originated with a Welsh Anglican named W. H. Griffith Thomas.[1] While I agree with all five of Thomas' exhortations, the one I want to focus on in this essay is his third: "Write yourself clear."

There has long been a debate in preaching circles on whether or not a preacher should manuscript his sermons. While it's true that some of the great preachers throughout church history (including favorites such as Charles Spurgeon and Martin Lloyd Jones) did not use and even discouraged the use of the manuscript, I am not as smart as Charles Spurgeon or Martin Lloyd Jones, and neither are you. So allow me to give you four reasons why you should consider writing manuscripts as a part of your sermon preparation.

FOUR REASONS TO WRITE A MANUSCRIPT

Write a manuscript to shorten your preparation time.

I was trying to encourage a pastor friend of mine toward writing manuscripts and he said, "I just don't have time to write a manuscript." Many pastors may give time as an excuse, and I understand how busy a pastor's week can be. Even as I write this article, in the back of my head I am thinking, "I really should be working on my sermon, or making a phone call, or coaching an intern." But I would argue that rather than lengthening your time of preparation, writing a manuscript can actually shorten it. When you are in your study and have come across something that's good for your sermon, just write it down, and there you have it. Then, when you build your sermon, you can just plug in all of your best notes and you don't have to go back and try to remember or find something you studied.

Write a manuscript to find the right words.

Mark Twain once said, "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug." What if John Owen had said, "Rid your life of sin because it is important for Christian

growth,” instead of, “be killing sin, or sin will be killing you”? Both sentences communicate the same truth, but the second sentence is said so well that it leaves a lasting impression on the heart. The right words matter, and writing a manuscript helps the preacher to not just say true things, but to say true things well.

Write a manuscript to ensure your sermon is congruent.

One of the marks of great preaching is that it's congruent. In fact, I was talking with another pastor friend recently and he said, “I had been preaching for years, but when I started writing a manuscript my sermons got better the next Sunday because they were instantly more congruent.” A good preacher has many high points that catch the attention of and inspire his listeners. A great preacher can grab his listener's attention and hold it for the duration of the sermon, smoothly leading them from one point to the next. Again, unless you have the mind of Spurgeon, it's difficult to do this without writing a manuscript.

A manuscript helps the preacher with transitions, as it clearly balances time for each point; a manuscript also helps to explain difficult passages or truths with clarity. This helps the preacher see his sermon as a whole *before* he delivers it, thus enabling him to easily and decisively edit his sermon. In fact, it's not until I'm looking at the finished product that I can really see the points that don't fit or may take away from the overall message. Preaching is a high calling from God, so the preacher must do whatever he can to place the best, most congruent, Spirit-filled argument before dying men whose only hope is that their souls would come alive in Christ.

Write a manuscript to have a record.

One of my greatest treasures are the 1200 sermons or so that I have preached across my years of ministry. And fortunately, because I was encouraged early on to write manuscripts, I have a record of all of them. They have been an enormous help to me in writing other sermons, or in preparing for preaching engagements outside of my own local church. Having a record of my sermons also helps in my pastoral ministry. Almost every Sunday, someone asks me to counsel them on something that I have just preached, and being able to point them to our web page where we post all of the sermon manuscripts online, or being able to email them an excerpt from a sermon is a powerful shepherding tool.

CONCLUSION

There are many other reasons you should manuscript your sermons: it helps the preacher stay on time; if you preach to multiple services, it can ensure the two congregations are getting the same teaching; it can help you avoid using the same illustrations; I could go on.

But I want to conclude by addressing the warnings given by Spurgeon, Lloyd Jones,[2] and others; the preacher should always be free, and the manuscript should never confine him. I agree with Spurgeon that the manuscript should never be read and that the preacher should be perceptive enough to at times speak extemporaneously, veering from the manuscript when he sense the need or desire to. If a preacher cannot help but read it, perhaps he should write the sermon, and then separately write an outline that he takes into the pulpit. While I believe the manuscript is one of the best tools in sermon preparation, it can be a dangerous tool in sermon delivery. You are the preacher, not the manuscript. You are delivering the sermon, not the manuscript. The manuscript is a great tool, but God anoints the man to preach, not the manuscript.

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1 J. I. Packer, *Truth and Power* (Guildford, Surrey: Eagle, 1990), 132.

2 Two classic resources on preaching are: C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students: Complete & Unabridged* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Pub. House, 1954), and David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Pub. House, 1972).



By Bob Johnson

The Value and Challenge of Sermon Review

Every week our ministry staff gathers for prayer, service review, and planning. Part of that meeting includes reviewing my sermon. We did it just yesterday.

Let me admit up front, a review of my sermon is not easy for me to facilitate. Preparing and preaching a sermon is both a private and public exercise, and it is deeply personal. A sermon is not simply a speech. A sermon by its very design is handling the Word of God so that it cuts, exposes, challenges, confronts, corrects, and soothes. That which it exposes is very intimate, so the process of studying is often very intimate. Wrestling with a text feels like wrestling with God. I do not handle the text as much as the text handles me. So what I bring to the pulpit is more than just information; it's the breath of life for those who accept it and the sentence of death for those who do not. Preaching is war, and I feel the battle that's being waged for the hearts of my hearers. When I am done, I am spent. I liken the entire process to childbirth. Identifying the text is like conception. Studying is the pregnancy. Preaching is the birthing process.

All that to say, when someone questions or critiques my sermon it feels like they are critiquing of one of my kids. Why on earth would anyone ever do that? And why on earth would I let them, much less make this a weekly event on Mondays?

Yesterday was a perfect example. Here's a rough transcript of what happened. (By the way, I don't lead the sermon review discussion. I've found that the staff feels more freedom to speak honestly if I am as "absent" as possible in the conversation.)

Chris: "So, what did you think about the sermon yesterday? What were your take-aways?"

David: "The introduction and first point were way too long. The amount of detail and background really lost me. However, the four take-home truths at the end were gold. I wished you had cut out most of the beginning so that you could have emphasized and expanded on the points at the end."

Johnny: "I loved the introduction and the background you gave in the first point. In fact, you set up the application in the introduction so that I knew where you were going with it. I loved it and felt that I really felt the weight of the text in the way that you wanted."

Nathan: "I agree with David. Too much information at the beginning and too little time for application at the end."

Brien: "I loved the background stuff and thought that it was necessary to understand what was going on. That nailed it for me."

There was more to the conversation, but it gives you the gist. And a conversation about like this takes place almost every Monday.

Here is why I led our staff to do this.

- I need to improve as a preacher, and I will always need to improve as a preacher. If I am not humble enough to admit that, then I am disqualified to preach.
- No sermon that I preach will ever be perfect. I need to constantly cultivate humility since I am so prone to self-pity and arrogance, especially on Mondays.
- If my staff is affected differently by the same sermon, how much more are my people? This exercise is such a good reminder to me that if I want to cultivate growth in all of the different types of people in my congregation, then I need to cultivate my speaking to help each of them profit from the preaching.
- If I want to offer suggestions to my staff to help them improve their preaching, then I need to set the example in how to listen to helpful critiques.
- I want to cultivate an atmosphere where our church can have personal and honest conversations about sensitive matters without being defensive. If the leaders can learn to do that, then the people will be more inclined to follow that path.
- I want to serve with people who not only love God, but who love one another and me. I do not want them to fear me. I want them to love me. If I want them to love me, then I must love them first. If I love them, then I will value their input and even ask for it. If they fear me, they will probably not be honest with me.

I do not preach exactly the same way that I used to. I hope that ten years from now I will not preach exactly as I do now. I hope to get better. I need honest feedback for that to take place. I am grateful for a ministry team that provides it, even if they never agree!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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By Keith Collier

How to Evaluate Your Pastor's Sermons

Picture this: two men are standing in front of a live audience to compete for votes. Each hopes to give his best performance, to somehow impress the crowd so that when the ballots are tallied, he will be chosen the winner.

No, this isn't the latest talent-based reality brainchild of Simon Cowell or Mark Burnett. It's actually a scenario raised by a well-meaning church member at the start of our church's search for a senior pastor.

Unfamiliar with the search process, this dear sister asked if, after examining all of the resumes, we would whittle the number of candidates down to two and have them come in to participate in some kind of "Preach Off." Then and only then would the members vote for the one they liked best.

Her question was innocent, but I'm sure something like this kind of process has sadly played itself out in more than one church, leaving behind a wake of confusion, hurt feelings, and division. The reason for this is that it treats the preaching of God's Word as a kind of performance with which we either give our approval or disapproval.

Of course, we live in a culture of critique with entertainment-driven evaluation and instant feedback:

- Celebrity judges on reality television evaluate people's talents, singing, dancing, cooking, etc., offering witty comments and cutting judgments.
- Talking heads on sports and political broadcasts argue with each other, second-guessing every decision and analyzing others' performances.
- Social media provides instant feedback loops on articles, photos, videos, and everything else. Many an ego has been stroked and many a heart has been broken by the comments (or lack thereof) that stream into one's feed.

Which brings us to that question that often pops up during Sunday lunch conversations with friends and family: "What did you think of the sermon?" If we're not careful, our answers can sound more like the scenarios above, more focused on the sizzle than the steak.

SERMON EVALUATION IN THE BIBLE

In the Bible, we see wrong ways and right ways to evaluate preaching:

- **WRONG** – In Paul’s second letter to Timothy, his son in the ministry, he warns, “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Timothy 4:3-4). The congregation Paul is describing evaluates the sermons but according to their own pleasure-o-meter. They just want to hear sermons that make them feel good.
- **RIGHT** – During one of Paul’s missionary journeys, he and Silas entered the city of Berea and began preaching in the synagogues. It was said of the Bereans, “Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” Rather than just listen for what made them feel good, the Bereans evaluated Paul and Silas’ sermons in light of their alignment with the Scriptures.

Assuming your pastor preaches sound, biblical sermons, here are six practical ways you can evaluate his sermons that will aid your own spiritual growth, strengthen your pastor’s preaching ministry, and build up your church.

SIX WAYS TO EVALUATE YOUR PASTOR’S SERMON

Evaluate prayerfully.

Leading up to Sunday, spend time on your knees. Pray for your pastor as he prepares his sermon, that he would clearly and compellingly preach the gospel. A good pastor knows well the burden of rightly dividing the word of truth and cherishes the prayers of his people. Additionally, pray for yourself to have ears to hear and for the Holy Spirit’s help in evaluating the sermon. Pray also that the congregation would respond in faith and obedience.

Evaluate for understanding.

Sermon evaluation involves more than if you liked or didn’t like the sermon; it comes down to if you understood the main point(s) of the passage preached. It doesn’t matter how eloquent or engaging or humorous your pastor is, you have completely missed the point if you haven’t focused on understanding the message. As you listen, identify the main points and consider their application for your life.

Evaluate critically but not critically.

Yes, you read that right. The difference between the two is the subtle difference between critique and criticism.

In the positive sense, we should evaluate a sermon critically like the Bereans evaluated Paul’s sermons—by testing it against Scripture and considering its applications.

In the negative sense, we should avoid evaluating sermons with a spirit of criticism. In our efforts to examine the content of the message, we must be careful not to slip into tearing down the messenger. Every pastor has weaknesses and shortcomings. There is no need to pick apart his grammar or nervous habits. You need not keep a tally of his misspeaks and overused phrases. Dissecting your pastor’s weaknesses distracts you from the message and breeds contempt toward the messenger, neither of which is healthy. Trust me, chances are that your pastor is harder on himself in these areas than you are.

Evaluate in terms of “we” instead of “me.”

We live in an age of rampant Christian individualism where the nature of the Christian life is primarily viewed through the lens of personal growth and discovery. As a result, we often only consider how a sermon or passage of Scripture applies to us personally. However, there's another lens we should never overlook—the corporate, or congregational, nature of the Christian life. When considering the application of the sermon, don't just think about how it applies to you individually. Also consider what it would look like for your congregation to live out these truths collectively.

Evaluate without someone else in mind.

Thanks to podcasts, you can now listen to hours upon hours of sermons each week from a variety of gifted preachers all over the world. Certainly, there are personal spiritual benefits to listening to other pastors' sermons. At the same time, be careful not to let this access encourage unhealthy comparisons between your pastor's sermons and those from prominent preachers. God has given your pastor a particular flock to shepherd that he did not give these other pastors. While his sermons may not be as polished or precise, he better knows the strengths and weaknesses, the trials and tendencies, of your particular congregation better than any podcast preacher. For instance: is your congregation filled with legalists or hedonists? Your pastor will know, and will therefore know which way to lean when preaching. God has uniquely situated him to apply Scripture to the life of your church.

Evaluate to encourage.

As you listen to the sermon, look for positive aspects of the sermon and truths God teaches you through it, and make it a point to tell your pastor. When you do, be specific. Don't just shake his hand and say, "Good sermon." Say something like, "The Lord really challenged me when you explained that second part of the passage about generosity." In the long run, good, helpful feedback will make him an even better preacher, which will contribute to your own spiritual growth and build up the church to the glory of Christ.

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By Matt McCullough

Hope for the Melancholy Preacher

Joe thought he'd be a better preacher. Did you?

I don't mean he had pretensions to glory, necessarily. Just that of the range of things he knew he'd have to do once he started ministry, he figured preaching would come easiest. It's what drew him to ministry in the first place, after all. He loves study, organization, communication. He listens to Keller and Piper when he jogs. He's got bios of Spurgeon and Whitefield on his night stand.

Coming out of seminary, he knew counseling would be a challenge, that administration would take on-the-job training, that he knew little about effective marketing, that managing staff or volunteers wouldn't be natural at first. But he figured if there's one thing he can do well, it's understanding and explaining the Bible in an engaging way.

And good thing too, he thought, because biblical preaching is the lifeblood of the church. He believes that if everything else has to fail so preaching can go well it's a worthy cost. It's a cost Joe's paying. Balls are dropping all around him so he can spend his 20 hours prepping.

All of this amounts to a huge existential burden that each sermon has to carry. Joe feels like he's got to hit a home run to justify mediocrity in every other area of his job. But his sermons rarely feel like home runs.

And there's more. Joe knows from his pastoral care that his context is far removed from the class full of seminarians where he delivered his first sermons. He's not working with theory anymore. He's speaking into the lives of real people—people he knows and loves and desperately wants to help. He knows they need more perspective on the hard things in their lives. More confidence in their faith that Jesus is true. More urgency while facing the problems in their marriage. He knows what they need is so great and so specific to the circumstances of each one of their lives he can't imagine how a single sermon could get the job done. But Joe's trying his hardest. He carries that weight in his study all week; it's on his shoulders every time he steps into the pulpit.

SOUND FAMILIAR?

To whatever extent this description reflects your experience, your experience reflects mine. In more ways than I'd like to admit, I've been Joe. Weekly preaching is a tremendous emotional, intellectual, and psychological burden we carry with

us all the time. Some of that is in the nature of the beast. Some of it stems from the idol factories we nurture inside. It's a complicated burden and it can deal a deadly blow to ministry longevity.

Where can we find the perspective we need to keep pressing on? How do we learn to live with the fact that no sermon will ever measure up to the depths of our text, to the needs of our people, or to our ideal images of ourselves? What does success look like when you know your preaching will never be good enough?

FOLLOWING THE BAPTIST TO FREEDOM

A while ago I was pressing through a season of discouragement in my preaching at the same time I was preparing for a new series on John's Gospel. The way the Evangelist describes the ministry of John the Baptist was incredibly helpful for me then—and it's a perspective I've been seeking to grow into ever since. There are three places the ministry of the Baptist shows up, and in each case there's a message we need if we want to preach with confidence, freedom, and joy.

1. "I am not the Christ" (John 1:19-28).

We first hear John speak when the priests and Levites come down from Jerusalem for an up-close look at his ministry. The Evangelist doesn't fill in many details of John's style or his popularity, but given the way other writers describe him it's not difficult to imagine what these Jewish leaders expected to find.

They come asking, in essence, *who do you think you are?* They'd surely heard about his bohemian dress, his eccentric diet, his outlandish statements. They probably expected a guy who was full of himself. But John's answers only speak to who he's not: "I am not the Christ" (1:20).

John isn't trying to protect himself and deflect attention. This isn't an Obi Wan, these-aren't-the-droids-you're-looking-for evasive move. He'll give up his life soon enough. Here, though, he doesn't want to talk about himself because he knows and loves the fact that he's not the point. He's not the solution. He's not the hero. He can't save anybody. He's not the one you're looking for. And he not only accepts this reality—he embraces it.

There's great freedom for us when we as preachers embrace that, too. There's no denying our sermons will never be able give our people what they really need. Thank God I am not the Christ.

Of course, it's essential that we bear the burdens of our people alongside them. It's unavoidable that we carry those burdens into our pulpits, but it is not left to us and our sermons to deliver our people from those burdens. Only the Christ can do that, and it's precisely what he came to do.

Consider this prayer as you rise to address your people this week:

Thank you God that you have given them—given me—a far greater Savior than I could be. Thank you for Jesus, whose work is finished, and for your Spirit, who knows how to apply it.

2. "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:22-30).

The next time we hear from John the setting is somewhere out in the Judean countryside, a place where there was plenty of water. Jesus and his disciples are in the area performing baptisms, and John was nearby doing the same thing. The dialogue opens with John's followers who come to him with an all-too-human concern. They're worried that John's ministry has been eclipsed by Jesus'. Jesus was a nobody before John talked him up, they imply, but now look what's happened. Their exaggeration makes their frustration clear: "Everyone's going to him" (3:26).

John's response offers remarkable clarification for our goal in preaching. It follows directly from the fact that we're nobody's Christ. Our job is to set people up with the one who saves and then to get out of the way.

The metaphor John uses with his friends still speaks powerfully today. He refers to the bridegroom—that's Jesus; the bride—that's his people; and the friend of the bridegroom—that's John. "The one who has the bride is the bridegroom," John says. But the friend of the bridegroom isn't jealous. He was looking to make the introduction, not looking for a bride of his own. He was looking to set his buddy up, and he "rejoices greatly" that the job is done (3:29).

From one perspective, John's ministry—his life's work—is fizzling out. In a matter of months he'll have his head served up on a platter. Surely he can read the signs. But, far from despairing, he claims "this joy of mine is now complete" (3:29). He faces obscurity and death with joy because the aim of his life and ministry was focused and fulfilled: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (3:30).

That's a liberating manifesto for preaching ministry, isn't it? For a while I kept the phrase on a sticky-note attached to my office computer where I write my sermons. Where I struggle with disappointment over sermons that aren't what I wish they were. Where I'm tempted to write in content that will make me look good. It's good to be creative, insightful, vivid, and winsome. But in the end, there's one main question we must ask of our sermons, one metric for judging their effectiveness: is the beauty of Jesus accessible?

Lord, help me believe that the most important thing about me is the Jesus I proclaim. My only glory is his, shared with me as a gift because I'm one with him.

3. "Everything that John said about this man was true" (John 10:40-42).

The final reference to the Baptist in John's Gospel comes in chapter 10. He's been executed by this point, and Jesus has come to an area where John had done much of his ministry. Many of those who had heard John's preaching now encountered Jesus for themselves. Here's their conclusion: "John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true" (10:41).

How's that for an epitaph? Would that work for you?

Let's imagine this is said of Joe, our melancholy preacher:

"You know, I heard plenty preachers more engaging. Others were funnier, more thought provoking and memorable. Joe did no sign. But everything he said about Jesus was true. We've seen it for ourselves."

There's the epitaph we want, brothers. And by God's grace, so long as we're faithful to his Word, it's in reach for all of us. So let's cast off our fears, our insecurities, our disappointments—and go for it.

Father, as I preach, guide me in truth. Protect me from error. Show them he's true. Let them taste of his beauty..

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By Steve Hussung

What I've Learned after 33 Years of Preaching

Editor's note: This is a companion piece to [“What I've Learned After One Year of Preaching God's Word.”](#)

It is difficult for me to get my mind around it, but I have now been preaching weekly, or trying to preach weekly, for 33 years. The first six years were mostly to Native Americans in Lame Deer, Montana. The next decade was spent in a rural setting in Christian County, Kentucky. These final 17 plus years have been just outside the university town of Bowling Green, Kentucky.

It all began when I was 22 years old when I had just graduated from college. My training was almost entirely informal. I had so much to learn, and I still do. Yet the Lord has taught me much through these years.

1. People really are listening.

I started my ministry with what now seems like a low view of preaching. Maybe it was the jokes I heard about long sermons being too long? Whatever it was, I imagined that real ministry would be done in one-on-one conversations, in situations where the gospel would be demonstrated through loving someone rather than preaching.

Somewhere along the way, however, I began to realize that the people really were listening.

Recently, an eleven-year-old boy shared with me how the Lord brought him to new life in Christ. It was last June, and I was stammering through the glories of the gospel as displayed in marriage from Ephesians 5. Out there in the pew was this ten-year-old boy wrestling with God. He was saying to himself, “I’m really not that sinful. My sin doesn’t deserve death on a cross.” But the Spirit kept pressing on him, answering, “Yes, you are. You know you are.” Somewhere in the midst of the preaching the Lord brought him to the place of surrender and trust.

If a ten-year-old boy can be converted while his pastor preaches on marriage, then the Word of God must arrest the attention of anyone.

2. God is faithful.

I am a very ordinary man and a very ordinary preacher. As a consequence, I need a lot of help. I need help preparing. I need help delivering. And I need help avoiding despair after a bad sermon and when pride causes me to think it might have been a good one. Yet the Lord has been so very kind to me and is remarkably faithful to help.

For about twenty years, I have been preaching through books of the Bible mostly from start to finish. Sometimes on Monday mornings I am face to face with a text, and I wonder what in the world I am going to say. It's scary, and Sundays are relentless! And yet the Lord always gives me something to nourish his people. He does this over and over again. In some seasons this has been so real to me that I feel like the widow woman with the jug of oil in 1 Kings 17. It never runs out! He is faithful to help me.

That said, I'm confident it's less about helping me and more about helping his people. Regardless, I am thankful. He helps me in delivery as well. Sometimes I feel like I'm carrying a great weight up a mountain when I'm preaching, but at other times I feel like I am the weight being carried. I rarely feel this when I preach elsewhere. But frequently, when I'm preaching to the people to whom God has called me, I experience his remarkable strength.

3. I need to preach.

Preaching is good for my soul. I need to dig into a text weekly. I need to hammer away at it until it yields something. Before I can ever preach to them, I need God to bring the text to bear on my own heart. I will be a hypocrite if I preach the text without it first cutting to my heart.

Years ago, I was preaching through the gospel of John. The Lord had been dealing with me about some sin in my life, but I wasn't responding to him the way I knew I should. I found myself facing "Nathanael in whom there is no deceit" (John 1:47). The Lord brought me to a deeper level of repentance and confession.

My process for preparation helps with this. I spend time early in the week trying to figure out what the Lord is saying from the passage. I want to get a sense of that into my head and heart as quickly as possible. This involves reading, re-reading, meditating, word studies, and checking commentaries to make sure I'm not way off-base

From this point on I am basically consumed with the sermon for the rest of the week. The sermon is simmering, never far from my thoughts, and it follows me everywhere—to hospital visits, staff and elders meetings, counseling sessions, quiet times, and prayer sessions. This approach weaves my preparation into my ministry with people. I preach best to people I know and to people who know me. I sleep with the sermon and wake up with it. During this phase I am thinking through what needs to be said and how the text needs to be applied. Late in the week I put the structure down in an outline form and think through an introduction and closing.

This approach to sermon preparation has the text so much on my mind that it shapes my heart. The Scriptures are primarily about the Lord, so these texts sink into my heart. Often, he is calling attention to some part of my life that simply must change in light of this text. I shudder to think where I would be spiritually if I didn't have this blessed weekly discipline.

4. The Scriptures are inexhaustible.

I have heard about preachers who couldn't stay in one congregation for very long because they only had so many sermons and then would run out. They couldn't re-preach old sermons, so they would move on to some other church.

Early on in my ministry, I too spent too much time worrying over what to preach. Then I began to preach through books of the Bible.

Now, at nearly the thirty-three year mark of ministry, I am running out of life much more quickly than I am running out of Bible.

Often I am struck while preaching a text that this may well be the last or only time I preach this text to these precious people. That is a weighty thought. There is no way I will get it all preached before I die or the Lord returns. The riches of Christ truly are unsearchable (Eph. 3:8).

If you're early in your ministry, stay at it. Paul told Timothy very near the end of his life to "preach the Word." He warned of a time when people would not be willing to endure sound teaching. We live in such a time, and it is especially crucial that we be faithful to solid biblical exposition. As the Lord graces you to do this faithfully week in and week out, you will see how crucial it is for your own soul and how crucial it is for his people. Thankfully, he has provided everything we need for this monumental task.

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By Dallas Goebel

What I've Learned after One Year of Preaching

Editor's note: This is a companion piece to [“What I've Learned After 33 Years of Preaching God's Word.”](#)

I love learning and books, theology and doctrine, church history and wrestling with difficult questions. These things are essential for the health of the church. But they are no substitute for the learning that comes from God by his Spirit through his Word.

“We know nothing till we are taught of the Holy Ghost, who speaks to the heart rather than to the ear.” Charles Spurgeon said this in his final message to the Pastor's College Conference after 42 years in the ministry. He had learned what it is to be “taught by God” (John 6:45). Well, I have 41 years to go until I reach that milestone, but over the last year of preaching through God's Word, I have become more aware of what he meant. God's Word has opened my eyes “to behold wondrous things” (Ps 119:18), and shepherding his people has allowed me to see visible expressions of God's spiritual truths.

In particular, three lessons from my first year stand out.

1. I underestimated the value of the local church in my “overestimation” of it.

I have always had a high estimation of the church. When my wife and I looked to join our first church together, one of the reasons we joined the church we did was because they faithfully practiced corrective church discipline.

Relative to the evangelical landscape, however, many would probably say I place too much value on the local church. They would say I overestimate it. That's because for many evangelicals, the church is not a people called to—among other things—“purge” evil from their midst like Israel. It's more like a community grocery store that sells goods to consumers and provides a comfortable coffee shop for people to talk about their life-journeys. It's not a temple where the glory of God appears and his commandments are stored, but more like the Areopagus where we can all gather to “hear something new” (Acts 17:21).

So I find it rather surprising that a year of preaching through Ephesians has taught me not that I overestimate the church, but that I've underestimated it. The Almighty showed me how weak my understanding was. Before, my understanding of church membership largely came from texts like Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 5, and 2 Corinthians 2. It was largely a logical implication of discipline. Now, my understanding of church membership begins with the vast plan of God to create and redeem a people for himself from before the foundation of the world (Eph 1) who, being reconciled to God, are now

reconciled to one another (Eph 2), to display the wisdom of God in the heavenly places (Eph 3) by living and growing together in unity (Eph 4), displaying an ethic of sacrificial love modeled after Christ himself and guided by the Spirit (Eph 5) as they wage war against the devil and persevere unto the end through prayer (Eph 6).

God places a much higher value on his church than I knew even a year ago!

2. A good pastor must also be a good gardener.

Before this last year my wife and I had always lived in apartments. Now we live in our church's parsonage, so it's the first year we've had a yard. We decided to plant some flowers and some plants with bizarre names, as well as grass in the patchy areas.

When we planted the grass seed, we watered it several times a day. But weeks went by and nothing sprouted. We didn't know what was going on. Did we need more fertilizer? Did we need to check the pH of the yard?

Then it started raining consistently. Suddenly, the seeds sprouted. The same thing happened with the flowers. One day they weren't there; the next they were.

A good gardener delights in what he plants, and finds joy in seeing the smallest fruit. So it must be for the pastor. Fruit does not appear right after the seed is sown. There is a process. It takes time and patience. The question is, when the smallest sprout appears, will we rejoice? Or will we grumble that it's not fully grown?

Spiritual fruit is slow-growing. The church does not become a vibrant, unified, mature people the moment we preach Ephesians 4. But we can see little sprouts of promise: a comment here, a prayer there; a gift here, a discussion there. Let us praise God for these moments!

3. The people of God need to meet Mr. Hermeneutics.

Why do so many people read such horrendous books and listen to such unbiblical preaching and think it is biblical? I suspect one reason is because they do not know how to "examine the Scriptures to see if these things are so" (Acts 17:11).

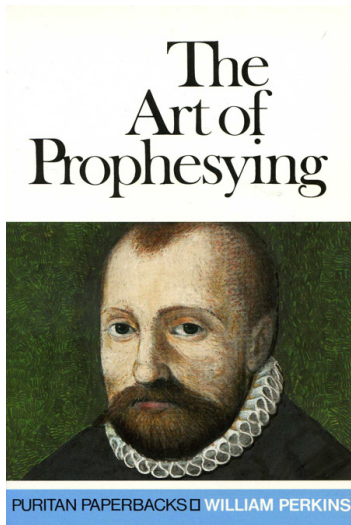
Biblical interpretation needs to be taught. I believe that we, as pastors, can wrongly assume that people know how to read the Bible. We have been trained in hermeneutics and forget that it's not foundational for everyone. Many people who read the Bible are not looking for authorial intent but for special, personal revelation because mysticism is the air our culture breathes.

Expositional preaching helps people read the Bible, but more is needed. We can teach God's people how to read God's Word through Sunday School, evening services, one-on-one discipleship, or small group studies. Whatever the means, it must become a priority in making disciples.

Take these three lessons for what they are worth. I'm no veteran, but God teaches even the rookies. Some seasons are better than others. Others aren't as good as they seem. But even if the day is dry, and there be no fruit on the vines, "yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation" (Hab 3:17-18).

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BOOK REVIEW:

The Art of Prophesying

Reviewed by Andrew Ballitch

William Perkins. *The Art of Prophesying; With, The Calling of the Ministry*, Rev. ed., Puritan Paperbacks (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996).

William Perkins (1558-1602) was the first English theologian to gain an international reputation after the Reformation. His works were translated and published throughout Europe. By the end of the sixteenth century in England, his writings began to displace those of John Calvin, Theodore Beza, and Heinrich Bullinger. Because of this, Perkins became known for his powerful preaching, such that he's remembered for it long after his death.

He served as the preacher at Great St. Andrew's Church in Cambridge for almost twenty years, from 1584 until his death in 1602. His prominent preaching ministry combined with his vast literary output earned Perkins the honorary title, "the father of Puritanism." Puritanism as a movement was devoted to placing competent preachers in every pulpit of the Church of England. Competency included right interpretation, plain style, and an ability to apply the text. It was from this foundation that Puritan preaching derived its power.

SUMMARY

While Perkins was certainly not the only proponent of Puritan preaching, he was the first to articulate it in a full-scale treatise on hermeneutics and homiletics. He did this in his classic work, *The Art of Prophesying*, first published in 1592. By "prophesying," Perkins meant preaching the Word and public prayer. He used this designation because he saw the pastor—as one who stands between God and the people as he exercised these duties—in the great succession of biblical prophets and apostles. Preaching is the focus of his book, and in 75 small, readable pages, he lays out his method of exposition.

Perkins summarizes preaching this way:

1. Reading the text clearly from the canonical Scriptures.
2. Explaining the meaning of the text, once it has been read, in the light of the Scriptures themselves.
3. Gathering a few profitable points of doctrine from the natural sense of the passage.
4. If the preacher is suitably gifted, applying the doctrines thus explained to the life and practice of the congregation in straightforward, plain speech. (79)

So, Perkins' preaching method is threefold: interpretation, analysis, and application. He proclaims, "The Word of God alone is to be preached, in its perfection and inner consistency. Scripture is the exclusive subject of preaching, the only field in which the preacher is to labor" (9). For Perkins, proper interpretation begins with grammar, rhetoric, and logical analysis. He encourages seeking the help of contemporary and ancient orthodox writers, as well as saturating the whole process in prayer. All of this has one goal: to bring out the one full and natural sense of the text.

The means, or key considerations, are the rule of faith—that is, the basics of Christian orthodoxy—the context of the passage, and its comparison with other passages. Analysis or "resolution" means unfolding the passage into its various doctrines. Whether explicit or implicit, these doctrines must be drawn from the genuine meaning of the text. Perhaps the most enduring significance of Perkins's labor is his emphasis on application—or, as he puts it, "the skill by which the doctrine which has been properly drawn from Scripture is handled in ways which are appropriate to the circumstances of the place and time and to the people in the congregation" (54).

WHY YOU SHOULD READ IT

There are many reasons why pastors today should read *The Art of Prophesying*. Some I have already mentioned, such as Perkins' emphasis on Scripture, his rigorous, yet simple, method of its interpretation, and his legacy of faithfulness. Here are few more that I have found uniquely helpful in Perkins' work.

First, there is great wisdom in Perkins' practical advice to preachers. He exhorts us to only correct the errors that our congregations are actually threatened by, so as not to create trouble that had not existed. He also urges that the correction of secondary issues be in a friendly manner. A final example of Perkins' practical guidance is from his insistence on a plain style. He warns about quenching the Spirit through the use of specialized vocabulary, elevated oratory, or Greek references. All these points of instruction are particularly appropriate for those of us in seminary!

Second, Perkins provides an approach for specific and pointed application, which is one of the most difficult aspects of sermon preparation. He breaks the preacher's audience down into seven categories or spiritual conditions of hearers: ignorant and un-teachable unbelievers, ignorant but teachable unbelievers, knowledgeable but un-humbled unbelievers, humbled unbelievers, believers, backsliders in faith or lifestyle, and mixed congregations of believers and unbelievers. He also draws four varieties of application from 2 Timothy 3:16; teaching and reproof involve informing the mind and recovering it from error, whereas instruction and correction include helping hearers to practically live out their faith in the spheres of family, state, and church so as to move from ungodliness to godliness. Coupled together, these taxonomies create a usable framework for practical application.

Third, Perkins reminds us of the men we must be in order to be effective preachers. I must be a man of prayer, both in preparation for preaching and in the pulpit itself. Further, I must possess holiness of heart and a blameless life. Perkins understands this godliness of the minister to flow from more than biblical understanding, but also "an inward sense and experience of the Word in his heart" (73).

In the context of today's confusion over preaching, *The Art of Prophesying* is a welcome reminder of a time-tested approach to evangelical preaching. It was the primary preaching manual in the English-speaking world on both sides of the Atlantic for generations—and for good reason. The perennial issues it addresses makes it surprisingly suited for our own context. The reader almost forgets the work is more than 400 years old. Perkins understood the value of preaching as two-fold: proclaiming and applying the truth. This gathers the elect and drives away the wolves; put differently, it is the means by which God builds his church. Whether one agrees with his particulars or not, this ought to be our vision for preaching even today. Perkins' offering will at the very least challenge pastors to be relentlessly biblical and to do the hard work of robust application. May Perkins' closing words express the essence of every preaching ministry today:

“The heart of the matter is this:
Preach one Christ,
by Christ,
to the praise of Christ.
Soli Deo Gloria.”

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Andrew Ballitch is a PhD student studying William Perkins at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He lives in Louisville, Kentucky, where he is a member of Hunsinger Lane Baptist Church.

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