

Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches

March 2020

IX 9Marks Journal



WHAT'S
WRONG
WITH GOSPEL-CENTERED
PREACHING TODAY?



Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches



9Marks Journal

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Editor's Note



Jonathan Leeman

A few years ago, I was enjoying dinner with David Helm, author of *Expositional Preaching* and the founder of The Charles Simeon Trust, probably the best preacher training ministry out there. He mentioned that he was concerned about the growing popularity of gospel-centered preaching.

What?! Why? Isn't gospel-centered preaching a good thing?

He answered, "Because the tail is going to start wagging the dog." Helm was worried that young preachers would get lazy, not pay close attention to their texts, and move toward Christ too quickly. They wouldn't do careful exegetical work; or preach the point of their particular texts; or take canonically responsible ways of moving toward the gospel. To put it another way, they would allegorize.

Of course, that's not the only problem with preaching out there. Some preachers don't preach the gospel at all. Others fail to apply the text to their whole church. And still others fail to respect the rules of their particular genre, have bad biblical theology, or

preach without exemplars. For all this start with Colton Colter's overview of preaching today. He listened to nearly 20 hours of preaching from America's biggest evangelical churches, and then wrote about what he heard. It's both discouraging and important. Then look at the articles by Robert Kinney, Ed Moore, Keith Collier, Jason Hood, and Sam Emadi.

We've taken the photographic negative (remember those?) approach to preaching genres—"How Not to Preach..."—by focusing on mistakes that seem pretty common among preachers today. Our goal is not to be overly critical, but to offer a guide for identifying the pitfalls any of us might fall into unawares.

The 9Marks Journal concludes with some constructive advice on preaching well, including a dense but absolutely crucial piece by David Schrock as well as typically helpful and wise articles by Mark Vroegop, Aaron Menikoff, Matt Haste, and Andy Prime. Also, don't miss the encouraging reflections on several well-known preaching texts by Ligon Duncan, Tim Cantrell, and Ryan Fullerton.

Brother pastors, we must give careful attention to our preaching. God's preached Word, working through God's Spirit, is God's primary instrument for growing God's church. In fact, God's Word is the most powerful force in the universe. God created the universe through his Word, and he is recreating it through his Word (Gen. 1:3; 2 Cor. 4:6).

God grows us as individuals and as local churches through our ears. That's why the apostles in Jerusalem asked others to care for the needs of the widows and address the unity problem in the church—two crucial matters! They knew they had to attend to the ministry of the Word and prayer.

If you're the main preaching pastor in your church, do your priorities match theirs?

4 Reflections after Listening to 18 Hours of Sermons in America's Biggest Churches

Colton Corter

What's the preaching like in America's biggest churches? That's the question my wife and I set out to answer. We listened to four sermons each from the country's nine biggest evangelical churches: Church of the Highlands (Birmingham, AL), North Point Ministries (Alpharetta, GA), Gateway Church (Southlake, TX), Crossroads Church (Cincinnati, OH), Christ's Church of the Valley (Peoria, AZ), Saddleback Church (Lake Forest, CA), Christ Fellowship Church (Palm Beach Gardens, FL), Elevation Church (Mathews, NC), and Southeast Christian Church (Louisville, KY). With an average sermon length of about 30 minutes, these reflections are based on

approximately 18 total hours of material. As we listened, we found several common threads. Those threads will make up most this article—a state of American preaching, if you will.

1. THE GOSPEL AT BEST ASSUMED; MOST OF THE TIME, IT'S ENTIRELY ABSENT.

Let me begin with the most important observation: in 36 sermons, the good news of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection was unclear 36 times. Often, some or all of these facets of the Christian gospel were left out. "No gospel" became a common note.

I don't mean to say various elements of the gospel weren't occasionally mentioned; they were. Todd Mullins (Christ Fellowship Church) mentions in his sermon series, "What Do You See Next?," that faith is believing in what Jesus did for you—carrying the cross, rising from the dead, etc. But none of those elements are articulated or explained. It's unclear exactly *why* we need Jesus to do anything for us. Furthermore, it's unclear exactly *what* he did by doing the things Mullins mentions. Isolated phrases here and there without much reference to how the Bible puts them together was the norm.

In his sermon, "The Robe of Righteousness," Robert Morris (Gateway Church) provides a happy exception. He mentions the doctrine of imputation, stating that we aren't worthy of God and are in need of a "balancing (of our) . . . account." Morris goes on to say that in the gospel we get Jesus' assets while Jesus receives our debts. That's as close to the gospel that any of these sermons gets—and even in this instance, the true things Morris mentions are isolated from the rest of the truths that make up the gospel message. (Neither God's holy judgment, sin, nor repentance is mentioned.)

But here's what's even more disheartening: in his next sermon, Morris says the Jesus who accomplished all this for us "lays down all his divinity" ("The Ring of Authority"). Conspicuously mis-

sing from Morris' explanation of what he calls "substitutionary, propitiatory, blood-bought salvation" is the response one must have to this message in order to be saved, which leads us to our next observation.

2. REPENTANCE RARELY COMES ACROSS AS SOMETHING URGENT AND NECESSARY; INSTEAD, IT'S EITHER OPTIONAL OR NOT WORTH MENTIONING AT ALL.

Repentance was mentioned only a handful of times in the sermons we listened to. Kyle Idleman (Southeast Christian Church) mentions repentance as a way to grow in Christian maturity. Morris says his daughter repented once and she was healed from migraines because the open door the enemy had in her life had been closed by doing so. Steven Furtick (Elevation Church), when speaking of the prodigal son, quips that the prodigal wasn't repentant, just hungry. In explaining how brokenness precedes breakthroughs, Chris Hodges (Church of the Highlands) mentions repentance but doesn't explain what it means or what it looks like to actually repent. In fact, Hodges hints that nominal Christianity—what he calls "fire insurance" Christianity—while not optimal, is all you need ("Mirror, Mirror").

Furthermore, the pastors of these churches rarely spoke like they were conscious that there were people in the building who were actively on their way to hell until they turned from their sins and trusted in Christ for salvation. Humans are never described as being in willful rebellion against God, and so sinfulness is described almost as a neutral happenstance, something that ought to be corrected by this or that but need not be overly dawdled over.

Because of this, every blessed promise and every moral command was applied to everyone without exception. It would take someone with acute self- and Bible-awareness to realize that the sliver of sinfulness mentioned throughout the sermon is enough to sink their ship.

3. WHILE THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL IS ABSENT, ITS SHADOW LURKS IN THE BACKGROUND.

At least two of the churches, North Point and Crossroads, had a sermon or sermons on the subject of “winning.” Brian Tome (Crossroads) defines winning this way: “to find God’s will for your life and accomplish it” (“Tenacity”, week 2). What’s Tome’s win for this year? 100,000 social media followers so that his “spiritual influence” can spread. Tome goes on to say in his sermon, “Target,” that “winning” is a biblical commandment.

Nearly all the sermons we listened to had a decidedly cheery tone. We also heard a lot about miracles—not necessarily as an implication of a decided theological framework, but rather as a rhetorical device to justify the sermon’s positive outlook on the future.

Let me be clear: I don’t remember a single sermon that espoused an explicit prosperity gospel. No sowing seeds. No reaping financial harvests. But if you listened in as a visitor, it would be hard not to come away thinking that God wants you to live a happy life full of relational, mental, and emotional “wins.” Whether the preacher referred to “winning” or not, listening to these sermons could make one think that Christianity is most interested in curbing our bad habits so that we can all be better versions of ourselves. In fact, taken at face value, Ashley Wooldridge deserves an honorable mention in the clearest gospel category. He explained that Jesus lived a perfect life, died for all, and rose from the dead. But he said these things to prove Jesus is “the x-factor of habit change.” (“Stopping a Bad Habit”).

Put simply, the themes of self-improvement and self-actualization crowded out a prior necessity: heart change and sanctification. Our greatest problem becomes that undesirable habit, not our underlying sin before God. And the result of knowing the Lord is reduced to being a better you and living a full life. The word “sin,”

whether in believers or unbelievers, is rarely mentioned. All of this, of course, is divorced from any discussion of God's judgment. In these sermons, God is affable. He's not level with us, but he's willing to level with us. He's serious, but not *too serious*.

What about suffering? Well, there seemed to me to be an unstated assumption that positivity and progress comprise the general tenor of the Christian life. When suffering is talked about, it was usually mentioned as something to escape by talking to an elder or changing certain habits or mindsets. I couldn't help but wonder: would these churches be a hard place for those whose lives, year after year after year, just kind of subsist?

Thankfully, Hodges (Church of the Highlands) devotes an entire message to suffering ("No Pain, No Gain"). He affirms that God leads us through dark days. But just as he points the audience to eternity with God in heaven, he makes a quip to lighten the mood. Still, this dose of realism served as a welcomed departure from what were otherwise generally light and positive sermons.

4. THE USE OF THE BIBLE GENERALLY FELL INTO TWO CATEGORIES: MISUSE OR ABUSE.

Every preacher utilized the Bible in one way or the other—some more than others, others worse than some! Morris stood out as one who consistently read the entire passage he wanted to preach. Hodges read most of Genesis 32 in his sermon entitled "WrestleMania." Rick Warren said Saddleback self-consciously tries to base everything they do on the Word of God. Most of the sermons had a main text of sorts but the degree to which the text was used varied. Narratives and parables were by far the preferred genre, and the move from text to application was usually hasty and direct.

Take, for example, Idleman's sermon, "One Day at a Time." Luke 2 is his main text. He uses the passage to make the following

point: since it took Jesus one day at a time to become who he was, we should expect the same. Tome said Rahab's story is a lesson that no matter what happened in 2019, you can be a winner in 2020 ("Tenacity," Week 2). Hodges compares the Old Testament law to things we in the present can't break through in "Mirror, Mirror"; in "Wrestlemania", he uses Jacob wrestling with God as an opportunity to ask his listeners about the areas *they* were currently wrestling through.

In still another sermon, "Hide and Seek," Hodges makes a hermeneutic move that is paradigmatic for the rest of the sermons we heard. He directly applies promises given to Jehoshaphat and David assuring them of military victory (1 Samuel 30) to modern hearers. The application skips past the Bible's storyline and fulfillment in Christ and moves directly to psychologized, anecdotal advice.

Simply put, in these sermons, men mostly mishandle the Bible. It's referenced, not revered; alluded to, not explained; sat across from, not under. When biblical stories are there, they're commonly being co-opted into the vocabulary of whatever else the preacher is trying to say about winning or breaking through or whatever. The words on the page rarely speak for themselves.

CONCLUSION

The point of this project isn't to poke fun at these churches or to indict their motivations. God alone knows the heart, and we are left simply to evaluate based on what's observable. The point of this project is to provide a snapshot of what a large percentage of American church-goers might hear when they darken the doors of a church building on Sunday morning. We assume that because such preaching is popular in large churches, it's often aspirational in smaller churches.

Our main take away, I believe, is to soberly reflect on the sermons we give and the sermons we listen to week in and week out. May God grant us and our churches mercy to clearly proclaim the gospel, edify the saints, and invite unbelievers into the greatest joy imaginable—life with God in Christ.

SERMON APPENDIX

North Point Community Church – Andy Stanley

- “Winning” (December 29, 2019)
- “Talking Points – One is the Win” (January 12, 2020)
- “Talking Points – Choosing Sides” (January 19, 2020)
- “Talking Points – Kingdom First” (January 26, 2020)

Saddleback Church – Rick Warren

- “The Only Family That Will Last Forever” (January 5, 2020)
- “What On Earth Am I Here For?” (January 12, 2020)
- “The Values That Matter Most to Us” (January 19, 2020)
- “How God Grows Our Faith” (January 26, 2020)

Southeast Christian Church – Kyle Idleman

- “One Day at a Time” (January 5, 2020)
- “One Decision at a Time” (January 12, 2020)
- “One Dollar at a Time” (January 19, 2020)
- “One Need at a Time” (February 9, 2020)

Crossroads Church – Brian Tome

- “Tenacity (January 11, 2020)
- “Target” (January 4, 2020)
- “People Over Politics” (February 8, 2020)
- “Love” (December 21, 2019)

Gateway Church – Robert Morris

- “King of Kings” (December 7, 2019)
- “The Robe of Righteousness” (January 11, 2020)
- “The Ring of Authority” (January 18, 2020)
- “The Shoes of Sonship” (January 25, 2020)

Christ’s Church of the Valley – Ashley Wooldridge

- “Starting a New Habit” (January 18, 2020)
- “Start With Who Over Do” (January 11, 2020)
- “Stopping a Bad Habit” (January 25, 2020)
- “Owner Vs. General Manager” (February 8, 2020)

Elevation Church – Steven Furtick

- “The Father Saw” (January 19, 2020)
- “Ghosted” (January 26, 2020)
- “Flip the Bag” (February 2, 2020)
- “Your Season to Succeed” (February 9, 2020)

Christ Fellowship Church – Todd Mullins

- “The God of More Than Enough” (November 11, 2019)
- “What Do You See Next? – Part 1” (January 6, 2020)
- “What Do You See Next? – Part 2” (January 13, 2020)
- “What Do You See Next? – Part 3” (January 21, 2020)

Church of the Highlands – Chris Hodges

- “WrestleMania” (January 5, 2020)
- “Mirror, Mirror” (January 12, 2020)
- “No Pain, No Gain” (January 19, 2020)
- “Hide and Seek” (January 26, 2020)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colton Corter lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas, where he is a member of University Baptist Church.

Why Mature Christians Need Gospel-Centered Preaching



Jeramie Rinne

Anwar is one of our elders and a father of three in his 50s. He teaches adult education classes, he leads Bible studies in both English and Arabic, and he meets with a platoon of men weekly at 6:30 a.m. before church for accountability and discipleship. The brother is a shepherding machine. He fearlessly wades into sticky pastoral situations and commands the respect and trust of the congregation.

Deborah has walked with her savior for 58 years. She listens to my sermons with her Bible open, pen in hand. She takes the treasures from the Word into her week to mentor others. Deborah prays like she has a direct line to God. She's faced many difficulties over the years, but these struggles only drive the stake of her faith deeper into Jesus. Her white hair is a glorious crown of wisdom and maturity.

Do seasoned saints like Anwar and Deborah need gospel-centered preaching? Haven't they progressed way past the basic truths of Jesus' death and resurrection? Isn't proclaiming Christ crucified week after week to them like telling a gourmet chef how to fry an egg, or reminding an ER doctor how to check vital signs? Aren't we supposed to "leave behind the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity" (Hebrews 6:1)?¹

In my experience, mature believers not only need gospel-centered preaching, but in fact savor it. Here's four things this type of preaching does for those grown-up in their faith:

1. IT CONNECTS THE BIBLE.

Mature Christians love the Scriptures. You can sometimes spot the veteran believers at church by the worn Bibles they carry, filled with highlighted pages. But these life-long Scripture students still need help putting their Bibles together. They know the stories, but often they haven't been shown how all those stories connect to form a single narrative that culminates in Jesus Christ.

They've heard sermons, for example, about how to imitate Joseph's integrity by fleeing sexual temptation. But they often haven't been shown how Joseph prefigures the betrayal, innocent suffering, death, resurrection, ascension, and global salvation of Jesus. They can tell you all about Adam in the garden and draw good morals from the story. But they likely can't articulate Adam's royal-priestly calling or map out God's successive, but unsuccessful, Adamic "reboots" through Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David. They can't explain how all this climaxes in Jesus, the last Adam, the true Son of God.

¹ Hebrews 6:1–3 might seem to suggest that the gospel is something that mature Christians leave behind. Jared Wilson (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/jared-c-wilson/hebrews-6-teach-move-gospel/>) and John Piper (<https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/does-hebrews-tell-us-to-grow-up-beyond-the-gospel>) give helpful responses. It's also noteworthy that the entire epistle of Hebrews gives us some of the richest, deepest theological reflections on the meaning of Christ's death in the New Testament. It stretches credulity to think that the writer of Hebrews sees his letter as an elementary doctrine of Christ that should be left behind.

Gospel-centered preaching threads together the Bible’s precious texts into a sparkling necklace, and Jesus is the crown jewel in the center. It creates biblical-theological “aha” moments that thrill mature Christians like Anwar and Deborah. Seeing Jesus in all of Scripture is like going through the attic and finding letters or old photos from your beloved grandmother whom you’ve known for years. They help you know her and treasure her all the more by learning more of her story.

2. IT INSPIRES SPIRITUAL GROWTH.

Anwar and Deborah would be quick to tell you that they haven’t arrived yet spiritually. They have a long way to go. “Mature” and “maturing” aren’t mutually exclusive categories. Even the apostle Paul said of himself:

Not that I have already obtained all this or am already perfect (*teleioo*), but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining for what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature (*teleios*) think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.” (Phil 3:12–15).

According to Paul, mature (*teleios*) Christians like himself press on to be perfect (*teleioo*). And what does perfection entail? Perfection is knowing Christ and having a life shaped by his death and resurrection. Paul again:

Indeed I count everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes from faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on fai-

th—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Phil 3:8–11).

Even mature believers experience mission drift. The world, the flesh, and the devil distract us from the great aim of knowing Christ. Gospel-centered preaching empowers precisely the kind of Christ-pursuing mindset and sanctification Paul describes by holding Christ up before saints like Anwar and Deborah. We all need someone to stand before us weekly and call us to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. The Bible is not ultimately an instruction book for life, or a moral encyclopedia of do's and don'ts. It's a great drama, an epic saga in which Jesus Christ is the heroic leading man who's death and resurrection enables us to know him and be like him.

3. IT FOSTERS UNITY.

The Roman Christians seemed to be mature. Their faith was being proclaimed throughout the whole world (Romans 1:8), and Paul was convinced that they were “full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another” (Romans 15:14). Yet he was “eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome” (Romans 1:15) and in fact spent the first 11 chapters doing so.

Why?

Part of the reason Paul sent this gospel-soaked letter was because the Roman church struggled with unity. Rifts between Jew and Gentile, between the strong and the weak (Romans 14), strained their fellowship. Yes, even mature Christians can struggle to maintain unity. Even proven gospel workers like Euodia and Synthche needed help agreeing (Philippians 4:2–3). I've noticed over the years that often the ugliest church splits revolve around conflict between long-time, pillar members.

Regular gospel-centered preaching reminds mature Christians of our unity in Christ. Those who have been reconciled to God through Jesus' death and resurrection have no excuse to be at odds with one another because the gospel is the power of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles (Romans 1:16). The gospel destroys walls of hostility and makes one new man out of two (Ephesians 2:13–18). Preaching Christ crucified weekly reminds us that Jesus laid down his rights to serve and save us. That's why Paul reminded the Romans that both strong and weak Christians should respect one another's consciences in debatable matters. Christ lived and died for them, and both the strong and weak were trying to live for Christ according to their conscience (Romans 14:1–9).

4. IT STOKES WORSHIP.

Most importantly, gospel-centered preaching fuels awe of Jesus. Our hearts swell with affection for Christ when we see him and his gospel as the center of history, the ground and model of our sanctification, and the source of our unity in the church.

Mature believers need this desperately. Our flesh still craves idols, even after decades of walking with God. Our fear of God leaks. The bonfire of devotion burns low. We living sacrifices keep crawling off the altar. Even the most mature believer can grow numb at Jesus' worth and take the wonder of our salvation for granted. We need regular exposure to the glory of God as revealed in the cross.

Gospel-centered preaching does just that. If Christ and his saving work is like a perfect, million-carat diamond with thousands of facets, then gospel-centered preaching aims to lift up and slowly turn that diamond before the congregation so that everyone may be dazzled again and again by seeing Jesus' excellency from different angles.

We gospel preachers have a great privilege. We get to walk every week with the blood-bought people of God—both spiritual babes and spiritual adults—just like Jesus walked with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. And like Jesus, we open our Bibles to Moses and all the Prophets and interpret to our hearers from all the Scriptures the things concerning Jesus. And when we do, Jesus exalts himself in their hearts and minds, and they exult in him. And by God’s grace, they will say, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:32).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeramie Rinne is an author and the senior pastor of Evangelical Community Church of Abu Dhabi in the UAE.

I Was A Gospel-Believing Preacher Who Didn't Preach the Gospel



Ed Moore

I was a minister of the gospel who for many years did not preach the gospel to my flock. How did this happen? Let me back up.

It's the early 1940s. Picture a zealous young man standing on a billiards table in the small western Pennsylvania town of DuBois, preaching the gospel to my father and his friends. My dad spent most of his spare time as a teenager in the pool hall, smoking cigarettes and losing money. He was raised in a liberal, mainline church. He'd never heard the gospel until a bold, self-appointed herald of the good news perched himself on a pool table and announced that "Christ died for the ungodly."

The sermon yielded no immediate results, but the message of the cross was clearly delivered. The young preacher never saw the fruit of his labor; he was killed in World War II. But shortly after the war, God saved my newlywed parents—and for the rest of his life, my dad remained thankful for that young man who initially brought him the message of saving grace. He lived the rest of his days committed to the gospel. By trade, he was a top-40 radio DJ. He would sign off the air each day by saying, “This is your country cousin, Charles Archibald Moore, bidding you farewell and encouraging you to place your faith and trust in Jesus Christ and his precious blood.” He was never ashamed of the gospel, and always gaged the ability of a preacher based upon how many times he mentioned “the blood of Jesus Christ.”

Fast forward to 1961. I was born on the same day that my maternal grandmother was buried. At her funeral, that same gospel was preached and my uncle came to saving faith. All this to say that the gospel was the centerpiece of our family life long before I was born. I point this out not to boast, but rather to state that God graciously placed me in a home where the gospel was a priority. Eventually, God brought me spiritual life at the age of 16 when, upon hearing the gospel for the umpteenth time, the Holy Spirit regenerated me and granted repentance and saving faith.

My college years were spent aggressively sharing the gospel with the lost through the influence of a campus ministry. I graduated from the University of Georgia in 1984 and started my first ministry job two days later. I worked as an overzealous youth director, and my evangelistic efforts gave evidence that I was fully convinced that the power of God unto salvation is the gospel. Even though my methodology at the time was decisionalistic, my burden for those teenagers was heartfelt and genuine.

Thankfully, there was a major shift in my theology during this stage of life. The truths of reformed soteriology gripped

my heart and my enthusiasm to rescue the perishing remained. In time, I earned an M.Div. and became the pastor of North Shore Baptist Church in Bayside, NY. If you were to listen to my sermons from 1984-2005—and I strongly suggest that you do not invest your time doing so—you would be hard pressed to find a single message in which I did not preach the gospel to unbelievers. I was raised with the gospel, I believed the gospel, I preached the gospel!

And yet, my sermons and my entire ministry were incongruent. There was always a portion of the message dedicated to the unbeliever. I told them in clear terms the necessity of coming in faith to Christ for eternal life. I have no regrets with respect to how I addressed the enemies of God. The gospel was in every message I ever preached, but there was a problem: it was confined to the unconverted. Once the obligatory outward call to salvation box was checked, I would then preach the rest of the sermon to believers. The spiritual growth portion of the message may have been true to the text, but it was almost always driven by moralistic and/or legalistic motives.

How could this happen? In my worldview, the gospel was for the unsaved—and *only for the unsaved*. The practical application for day-to-day Christian living was driven by long to-do lists and usually propelled by guilt and shame. The messages, which always included a “come to Jesus for salvation” commercial, were for the most part works-based, motivational speeches with chapter and verse support. This was sadly true because I didn’t grasp the fact that the gospel is for both the unsaved *and* the saved, for both evangelism and sanctification.

I was not intentionally withholding gospel help from the saints; I simply did not understand that the gospel is for believers. How could I have missed this when it’s so plainly obvious in the New Testament? I’ll never know the answer to this question. I can, however, liken it to my discovery of the doctrines

of grace. When God's sovereignty in all things was pointed out to me, I suddenly saw it everywhere in Holy Writ. It was as if someone had stolen my Bible in the middle of the night and inserted verses on every page which supported the glorious truth that "salvation is of the Lord." Likewise, when it was brought to my attention that the gospel is for the saved, it was an equally profound revelation. Ironically, many of the verses which unequivocally support the fact that Christians need the gospel were verses that I had committed to memory as a child. This is why it is so important to teach not only what a verse says, but also what it means.

Speaking of means, the means that God used to bring this to my attention was a desire to learn about church planting. In 2005, I became acquainted with some men who were part of a Sovereign Grace church. I knew very little about their ministry at the time. I was aware that they had really good music and that they were very fruitful in church planting. When I was invited to attend a pastors' conference in April of 2005, I went with the intention of learning something about how our church could be more effective in church planting endeavors in NYC. My intentions were noble, but God had something much more foundational in store for me.

At the time, I wasn't highly skilled at overseeing church planting efforts and, sadly, that conference did nothing to elevate my abilities. To this day, fifteen years later, I remain comparatively deficient at church planting. However, I was graciously introduced to something infinitely more valuable, and that was the clear teaching in Scripture that the gospel is of first importance in the life of a child of God. At that conference, Pastor Mike Bullmore, from Bristol, Wisconsin, preached a sermon entitled "The Functional Centrality of the Gospel." A light went on in my head and my life was forever changed. C.J. Mahaney's little orange book, *The Cross Centered Life*, reinforced everything I learned at that

conference. I was further helped by the writing of Jerry Bridges in his masterpiece, *The Gospel for Real Life*.

I still remember the profound, paradigm-shifting encounter I had with God and His Word. These truths which invaded my thinking and preaching also had a profound impact on my heart and ministry. I do not have a sufficient vocabulary that can adequately put into words the joy that flooded my heart when I came to see that every aspect of my life in Christ is defined by the fact that Christ, my Redeemer, suffered in my place and rose again for my justification. Once again, it was right under my nose all along, and I just didn't see it.

Everything that I am saying can be demonstrated simply by reading the words that are written in the Bible. One need not have a special decoder in order to see that the gospel is for the regenerate. This glorious gospel reaches deep into all areas of one's life. A fresh emphasis on the gospel will simultaneously bring both deeper conviction of sin and sweeter relief when applied to the soul. I had always lived with a very legalistic, performance-based value system. In my theology, the concept of "grace" always had a forensic emphasis with respect to my justification. To be clear, I still believe that! I just never could apply "grace" in day-to-day life until I saw the ways in which the gospel informs Christian living. These connections to Christ crucified radically changed the way that I lived, taught, and ministered.

When I introduced my newfound love for the gospel to my congregation, they immediately embraced it with joy. In fact, I don't recall anyone putting up any resistance to the overarching priority that the gospel is of first importance. Fifteen years later, it is a delight to write this article and remember the story of how God touched my heart with these glorious truths.

Allow me to cite a few examples from Scripture as to how the gospel informed my thinking, preaching, and living.

Giving: 2 Corinthians 8:9 "For you know the grace of our Lord

Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”

Service: Mark 10:45 “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Marriage: Ephesians 5:25 “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.”

Purity: 1 Corinthians 6:20 “For you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”

Forgiveness: Ephesians 4:32 “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

It sounds so strange now, but, as I said at the beginning, I was actually a minister of the gospel who for many years did not preach the gospel to my flock.

Even now, I have a weekly (sometimes daily) battle to keep Christ and his gospel as the preeminent feature of my sermons and service. I’m well-served to continually be reminded of what Paul said to a group of Christians in Corinth: “Now I would **re-mind** you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand” (1 Corinthians 15:1).

Why would the apostle have to give this reminder to people who already know it? Why would he have to stress this gospel (which is of first importance) to people who have already been saved by it? It’s because the gospel is not only the means by which we are saved, but it is also the means by which we walk through this life.

Colossians 2:6 “Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him.”

I always knew this verse, but I never *knew* this verse!

How did we receive Christ? Through the gospel! Likewise, through that same gospel we are to walk.

Examine your life, ministry, and sermons. Does the message of Christ crucified unmistakably characterize who you are? I, myself, need to re-ask this question on a regular basis. Hopefully a

grace-filled, Spirit-led self-examination will sharpen your focus on the cross. And, hopefully, there will be a corresponding joy that accompanies this truth.

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The Easy Application Your Sermon Is Probably Missing



Keith Collier

In the course of sermon preparation, as you consider applications of the text, who do you have in mind? Maybe you picture particular church members. Perhaps you think of different life stages. You ask, “How does this passage apply to business professionals, young marrieds, youth, parents, grandparents, singles, empty nesters?” Typically, these applications are aimed at how an individual believer might live out God’s Word. But there’s an obvious category that you’re probably overlooking: your church. You might call it corporate, or congregational, application.

Corporate application addresses how God’s Word speaks to a church’s congregational life together. This includes how members relate to one another and work together to live out the Scriptures. It also includes how the church as a whole can apply the text.

Every text has corporate applications. After all, the Bible is a congregational book—written about a people, to a people, for a people. While stories of individuals are scattered throughout Scripture, they’re told within God’s greater work among his people as a whole. From the Pentateuch to the prophets, the Old Testament addresses God’s distinct, covenant people, Israel. From the Gospels to Revelation, the New Testament reveals the formation and deployment of God’s new covenant people, the church. Even the metaphors used for the church in the New Testament—family, kingdom, building, body—are corporate entities made up of individual parts. So our application must address the individual parts as well as the corporate whole.

Let’s take a look at two examples (one OT and one NT):

Psalms 116 is a thanksgiving psalm with abundant applications for the individual believer. It begins as a personal prayer: “I love the Lord because he has heard my appeal for mercy. Because he has turned his ear to me, I will call out to him as long as I live” (v. 1–2). The psalmist goes on to praise God for rescuing him from a hopeless situation and delivering him from the pit of despair. Individual applications include trusting God in the midst of difficulty, crying out to him in moments of need, and praising him for his deliverance.

While it’s an individual prayer, it’s offered in a congregational context. It was a psalm sung in the temple after God had answered an individual’s prayer for help (v. 14). Verses 17–19 show this sacrifice of praise overflowing in the presence of the Lord’s people and in the courts of the Lord’s house, allowing the people of God to celebrate God’s grace and goodness together. So, one corporate application is the value of testimonies within the body of Christ. Another application is that we ought to “weep with those who weep,” walking with them in their moments of affliction. We also ought to “rejoice with those who rejoice,” celebrating God’s mercy and deliverance together.

The Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:5–15) contains Jesus' teaching on how to pray. I've heard some amazing sermons from this passage that have dramatically impacted my personal prayer life, but very few highlight its corporate aspects and applications. English translations make it easy to miss because they use the same word "you" for both singular and plural.

In Texas, we have a plural for you: y'all. And when you read the Lord's prayer in the original language, you'll find only verse 6 has a singular "you" followed by singular verbs. Everywhere else, Jesus uses "y'all" followed by plural verbs. The addition of "our" and "us" throughout the prayer solidifies its congregational nature. Jesus is giving a picture of what individual and corporate prayer should look like. As a congregation, we pray for one another's needs to be met and for protection against temptation. Additionally, our forgiveness of one another applies to church unity as well as the process of church discipline.

So, as you prepare your sermon for Sunday and work through application, don't forget to ask questions like these:

- How should the core truths of this passage shape the congregational life of our church?
- How should this truth shape what we do as a church, why we do it, and how we do it?
- How does this passage affect our polity?
- How does it affect the way we love, care, and interact with one another?
- How does it affect our mission together?

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Reflections on 2 Timothy 4:1



Ligon Duncan

*I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus,
who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing
and his kingdom: ²preach the word
2 Timothy 4:1*

In 2 Timothy 4:1, Paul charges Timothy to commit himself to preaching. In this final epistle of his life, Paul labors to impress on Timothy the seriousness of this charge. We can see how seriously Paul considers the preaching task by noticing five qualifying phrases.

First, I *solemnly* charge you. I imagine that Timothy would have been startled by Paul's use of "solemn" in this verse. After all, it's not like Paul was only discussing light and trivial matters in the previous chapter. Paul had just encouraged Timothy to affirm Scripture as God's Word, to follow him in suffering, and to

protect the sheep from false teaching. For Paul, faithful preaching is a matter of utmost solemnity.

Second, I solemnly charge you *in the presence of God*. Timothy must give an account of his ministry to the judge of all creation—the maker of heaven and earth. Paul is essentially saying, “The audience for this solemn oath-taking ceremony is the Lord Himself.” Paul wants Timothy to be aware that preaching must be carried out under God’s watch and in his presence. The Lord himself is Timothy’s ultimate audience—God is watching what he is doing.

Third, I solemnly charge you *in the presence of Christ Jesus*. Paul calls on Timothy to swear allegiance to this particular task under the watchful gaze of his Redeemer. Timothy’s job is to preach the word of salvation under the gaze of the one who gave his life for him.

Fourth, I solemnly charge you in the presence of Christ Jesus, *who is to judge the living and the dead*.” Jesus Christ is not only our Savior. He’s the ruler of all history—the one who will judge the living and the dead. Paul wants Timothy to remember that ministers are going to be judged in accordance to their faithfulness by the Lord Jesus Christ on the Last Day. As James says, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (Jas. 3:1). One day, every pastor must stand before Jesus and give an account for how faithfully he served his flock, and in particular, how faithfully he preached God’s Word.

Fifth, I solemnly charge you *by his appearing and his kingdom*. Every faithful gospel preacher longs for one thing: the Day of the coming of the Lord. On that day, every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Paul charges Timothy to keep his eye on eternity, to preach in light of *that* day. So often we focus only on the challenges and issues that are before us. But Paul reminds us to keep our perspective focused on eternity.

Ultimately, Paul reminds Timothy that he must give an account of his preaching, not to Paul, or even to his congregation, but to the Lord Jesus. We preach to honor him.

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Reflections on 1 Peter 1:10–12



Tim Cantrell

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

1 Peter 1:10–12

As a young preacher, I was asked to expound 1 Peter to university students who patiently endured my rookie sermons. Since then, I've returned countless times to 1 Peter for encouragement. Tucked away in Peter's prologue, we find the above encouragement that preachers dare not miss.

This fisherman-turned-preacher introduces his epistle by magnifying the glories of the gospel for persecuted Christians and comforting sufferers with the benefits of our salvation. When Peter reaches verse 12, he stirs the heart of every faithful pastor with two realities: *what* we preach (our message), and *how* we preach (our muscle). We know Peter is talking to preachers by the verbs he uses to describe the preacher's task: "announcing" and "evangelizing." As I enter the pulpit this coming Sunday, these two reminders fill me with an overwhelming sense of gospel privilege.

FIRST, CONSIDER OUR MESSAGE.

This glorious "salvation" and "grace" was foretold long ago in messianic prophecy, over centuries of careful searching and burning curiosity (v. 10). Consider Isaiah. He knew God had promised "a Son would be given," an "Immanuel" would come, and a Suffering Servant would die for sinners (Isa. 7:14; 9:16; 53). Through these prophets, God's Spirit was "pointing" to a bloody cross and an empty tomb (1 Pet. 1:11). But who would this savior be, and when would he come? They saw the bud, but never the blossom.

We live on the other side of the cross, surrounded by the rich flowering of gospel fulfillment. The Lord also showed these seers of old that they were "serving" future saints—like you and me (v. 12a). Preachers, let's read and preach the Old Testament as the apostles did, convinced that it was also written "for us" (Rom. 4:23; 15:4; 1 Cor. 9:9; 10:11). Jesus said, "Many prophets and saints . . . longed to see what you now see, yet never saw it; to hear what you hear, yet never heard it" (Matt. 13:17).

Even more, Peter even says that "angels long to look" into this gospel message (v. 12d). Gabriel longs to discover what God has done to redeem sinners. How this humbles and inspires the preacher!

SECOND, CONSIDER OUR MUSCLE:

“preached . . . by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven” (v. 12).

Praise God that we do not approach the pulpit in our own strength. Heaven has come to the aid of poor, weak, deflated preachers prone to discouragement. God has not left us without an abundant supply of his strength for every sermon: “Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and who empowered the apostles is no less active and almighty today as Christ builds his church through faithful preaching.

Dear brothers, may this God-given privilege and power fire our hearts and fuel our preaching to the end of the age!

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Reflections on 1 Thessalonians 2:13



Ryan Fullerton

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

1 Thessalonians 2:13

Preachers are aware of many things as they prepare. They're aware of the people they will speak to—the mom in the third row in the middle of a divorce, the atheist friend who is visiting on account of her neighbor's invitation. We're aware of our appearance. We don't want to be that guy who preached with his fly down. We're aware of the clock. Will this sermon that I've already drastically edited fit into the time remaining in the service? We're aware of our notes, wondering whether they will serve us well or fail us?

Preachers are aware of many things, and if we're not careful, we'll become subtly unaware of the main thing—we are mounting the pulpit to share the very words of the living God. The Apostle Paul was keenly aware of this: “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess. 2:13).

Paul's preaching was just as human as our preaching. He reminds the Thessalonians that the word they heard came “from us.” It came from ordinary guys—men with real time constraints, men with self-awareness (no doubt Paul's cohorts were aware that they were not all equally gifted), men with illnesses (Paul with his eyes, Timothy with his stomach), men who followed the occasional rabbit trail (see Eph. 3:1–21, especially 2–14).

Nonetheless, the Word they spoke was not the words of men. Though it came immediately from men, it came ultimately from God. True to form, this word from God came with powerful life-changing results. It was “at work” in these believers (2:13). It birthed in them saving faith, laboring love, and steadfast hope in Jesus Christ (1:3). It filled them with the Holy Spirit's power and deep conviction (1:5). So powerful was God's work in them that it made God's invisible work of election visible through their lives (1:4). This word made them “imitators of the churches of God in Christ” (2:14), so that, like it does everywhere it goes, it created men and women who “suffered” for Christ's sake (2:14). The Word we preach comes from very ordinary human lips but it comes with power that says, “let there be light” and “the light of the glory of Christ” shines in the hearts of many who hear us (Gen. 1:3, 2 Cor. 4:6). As Calvin says, this word produces in God's people such “reverence, fear, and obedience inasmuch as people, touched with a feeling of divine majesty, will never allow themselves to play games with it.” What a word we preach!

Brothers, often when I mount the pulpit I'm aware of the little things, like that uncooperative microphone wire on the side of my face. But we must remain aware of something far greater. The word we preach is not our own. It is God's. It creates worlds. It gives faith. It grants repentance. In our congregation it will not fail to produce and grow new creations in Christ! This thought fills me with awe and gives me confidence to speak nothing but his Word.

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Reflections on 1 Corinthians 2:1–5



Sinclair Ferguson

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

1 Corinthians 2:1–5

The power of Paul's words lies in the divine logic of the gospel, not merely in the word-order of his sentences. What, then, is the logic of 1 Corinthians 2:1–5?

It's that the message of the gospel is God-centered ("I proclaimed to you the testimony about God" v.1) and Christ-dominated ("nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (v.2).

This gospel requires its heralds to be experientially united to Christ in the outworking of his death ("weakness," "fear," "trembling" v.3). For, as Paul elsewhere explains more fully, new life works in others when "death is at work in us" (2 Cor. 4: 10–12; cf. Phil. 3:10–12; Col.1:24).

This in turn implies that our style of preaching must also be marked by crucifixion to the ways of the world, rejecting modes of communicating the message that do not harmonise with its cruciform content ("not . . . with eloquence or human wisdom . . . not with wise and persuasive words" vv.1, 4).

It also leads to this result: the faith of those who respond is not produced by the preacher's natural gifts (if so, it may easily dissipate in his absence or through his failure). It clearly depends on the Spirit's power.

Paul's words in part reflect his distinctive calling and circumstances. Nevertheless, their implications are profoundly challenging for preachers today. Here are four:

1. Dying in the pulpit is a *sine qua non* of new life in the pew. Of course, some aspects of preaching get "easier." But not the "dying." That will continue until you are dead. I sometimes wish that everyone in the congregation could preach just once, in order to experience "pulpit dying." It would surely lead to more fervent prayer for the ministry and ministers of the Word!

2. Paul does not eschew an eloquence created by Christ and the gospel. After all, 1 Corinthians 2:1–5 is itself a powerfully eloquent paragraph. But his Christ-eloquence arises from his monumental grasp of the gospel and its implications. It is not the eloquence of someone who communicates the impression he has mastered the text and loves the position of preacher. No, it springs from being mastered by the text and the fire of pastoral love it ignites for those to whom he ministers.

3. There cannot simultaneously be a demonstration of the Spirit's power and of my powers—whether of intellect, or of speech, or of personality. To this extent James Denney's oft-cited words remain true: "No man can give the impression that he himself is clever and that Christ is mighty to save."

4. Paul's words provide three significant litmus tests for my preaching:

- (i) To what extent does my congregation sense that my preaching is *dominantly* "about God" (v.1)?
- (ii) To what extent does my congregation feel "he is determined to know nothing while with us except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (v.2)?
- (iii) To what extent does my congregation experience "the Spirit's power" (v.4) in my preaching so that their faith rests "on God's power" (v.5)?

Challenging indeed!

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“Thou Shalt Not Steal” and Other Sermon Points I Didn’t Make Up

SOME THOUGHTS ON PASTORAL PLAGIARISM



Jared C. Wilson

A little over ten years ago, I was asked to ghostwrite a book for a famous Christian author. That was when I first woke up to the reality of plagiarism among Christian leaders. I’d heard of ghostwriting; I just didn’t realize how widespread it was until I saw behind-the-scenes of the evangelical publishing world. I wondered: *How can professing believers pass off another’s words as their own?*

Imagine my shock a few years after that when I first learned that some Christian preachers do the same!

Turns out it's a rather big thing, more widespread than most churchgoers even know. Just a couple of months ago, a friend asked me for advice on what to do about a pastor acquaintance across town who regularly preaches someone else's sermons as if they were his own work. There are even some churches and preaching resource services that package sermon content for sale to preachers in need of a message.

Is it really that wrong? Aren't we all just standing up and leaning into the Word of God which isn't original to us, anyway? And if someone was helped by the sermon, isn't that all that matters?

Well, no. Pastoral plagiarism matters because worship in "spirit and truth" (Jn. 4:24) matters. Plagiarized preaching is in fact a big deal. How do we know that?

WHY PLAGIARIZED PREACHING MATTERS

1. Plagiarism is disobedience.

God has commanded us not to lie and not to steal. Passing off another's work as your own is a disobedience two-fer. The preacher who relies on plagiarized material isn't just being dishonest, he's also stealing the hard work of another.

It's not wise to test God this way. Standing up on a regular basis before his people to declare his truth while engaging in willful dishonesty is a recipe for spiritual disaster. If you take these crooked, lazy shortcuts on such an important element of your ministry as the weekly sermon, other crooked, lazy shortcuts will follow, and likely are already taking place.

2. Plagiarism is potentially disqualifying.

The two non-negotiable elements of the pastoral task are "prayer and the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). There are plenty of other important things pastors must do, but these two are essen-

tially what make up *pastoring*. And a necessary requirement for the office of the pastorate is being “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). This is really the only “skill set” required of the pastor (as all the other biblical requirements speak to character and disposition). Being able to teach is of course a gift, not merely a skill, but the regular and willful sermon plagiarist is bringing his gift and his skill into question.

Being “able to teach” doesn’t simply mean being able to perform. It’s not primarily about eloquence. It’s about being able to rightly handle the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). If on a regular basis you’re leaning on someone else’s exegesis, someone else’s exposition, someone else’s personal illustrations, you’re eroding your own credibility to *do the work* and thus your own qualification to hold the office.

3. Plagiarism is distinctly unpastoral.

This is what I mean: faithful preachers have their congregations in mind when they’re preparing their sermons. They’re praying for their people, as many by name as possible, when they’re reading and meditating on the text. They’re doing appropriate contextualization in their preaching, keeping in mind the specific people and their needs (and concerns and sins and idols) when they’re making application or composing illustrations.

Faithful preachers write sermons for *their* people. Plagiarists think somebody’s leftovers will suffice. What would you think about the shepherd who relied on someone else’s work to feed his sheep? If he couldn’t be moved to do the hard work of feeding the flock himself, you might think, after a while, that he didn’t actually love them.

Now that you’re good and anxious about plagiarism, how might you avoid it?

HOW NOT TO PLAGIARIZE

1. When in doubt, cite it.

Most preachers understand that re-preaching someone else's entire sermon is not just dishonest, but also weird. It's more of the little elements of the sermon that sometimes have the feel of grayness. How do you know when to attribute certain turns of phrases or popular sentiments? If you're not sure about the source of a particular line or passage, do your due diligence in looking it up. If you know someone originated the phrase but can't locate the source, at the very least introduce the line with something like, "As someone once said..." or "As they say..."

2. When not in doubt, cite it.

If you know who originated a phrase or portion of your sermon you want to re-create, give credit. Always. Of course, you don't have to give the publishing date and page number in a pulpit sermon, but nothing is lost at all by introducing that portion with "John Piper writes..." or "R.C. Sproul once said..." Nothing is lost except perhaps a bit of the pride you shouldn't be coddling anyway. There's certainly nothing good gained by knowingly passing off another's words as your own.

This applies to illustrations as well. In some of the strangest examples of pastoral plagiarism I've been told about—but never witnessed, as far as I know!—someone will tell me about hearing a preacher tell a moving or funny first-person story and then later hearing the exact same story, in the exact same words, from another preacher, also in the first person! Passing off another person's actual experience as your own isn't just lying and stealing, it's also just downright bizarre. Don't be a weirdo. If the illustration is really that good and your sermon can't do without it, say, "I heard Matt Chandler tell a story once about..." or something similar. Or better yet, think of an actual story from your own experience that is comparable.

3. Do the work and trust the gospel.

There's nothing substantially satisfying in passing off another's hard work as your own. It may "land" well. It may move people. It might generate the laughs, the tears, and the applause you crave, but you know it's a lie. You didn't earn any of it. It's a sham.

How does this happen? Sometimes preachers are led into temptation to plagiarize because of overly busy schedules. They run out of time each week to prepare a sermon and feel cornered by the Sunday deadline. It's easier to take someone else's long, thought-out message than cram and crank out their own. In such cases, an overhaul of pastoral priorities may be in order.

Remember that the ministry of the Word is the primary task of the pastor. This means other things may need to take a secondary seat. In some small church or bi-vocational settings, you may need to be diligent to train your church to minister well to each other rather than relying totally on you to be their only supply of ministry. But do whatever you can to prioritize the Word and start as early as you can in preparing the preaching. This is what God has called you to do.

Sometimes, however, it's not a lack of prioritization or time management that leads a preacher into the temptation to plagiarize. Sometimes, it's simply their own insecurity. They don't think much of their own preaching and fear the congregation doesn't either. Maybe they've even been told as much. Setting aside for the moment the possibility that one isn't qualified to teach, remember that biblical preaching isn't reliant on eloquence or showmanship (1 Cor. 2:2). It's not reliant on intellectual elitism or academic displays. It's reliant on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So trust the gospel. Work hard at your sermon, doing your work as unto the Lord. Put your heart, soul, mind, and strength into it. Your people are worth your best work. But the impetus to do this week and week out must come from your approved position as a co-heir of grace. If your sense of approval or justification

is found in a great performance or in congregational approval or an increasing attendance, you're setting yourself up for a fall. Trust the gospel to do what you cannot, even on your best day. The gospel is where the power is. Mark Dever, H.B. Charles, and Ray Ortlund might be able to preach the gospel better than you, but they cannot preach a better gospel!

It was James Spurgeon who said that, by the way, about his grandson Charles.

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How Not to Preach the Pentateuch



David King

The Pentateuch, sometimes called the Torah or the Law, refers to the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. If you've ever preached from any of these books, you know they can be challenging. What follows are five pitfalls to avoid.

1. DON'T PREACH ONLY THE FUN PARTS OF THE PENTATEUCH.

For most pastors, I suspect the fun parts are the stories. Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, the tower of Babel, the patriarchs' accounts, the Joseph cycle, the exodus from Egypt, the wilderness wanderings—who doesn't like the stories! Not only are they instructive, they're enjoyable.

Or perhaps the fun parts for you are the obvious messianic prophecies and types. You love preaching about the serpent-crushing offspring, Melchizedek, the scepter in Judah, the bronze serpent, or the prophet like Moses.

Or maybe you get a kick out of preaching the genealogies, or the tabernacle measurements, or the holiness code. To each his own!

The point is, it's tempting as pastors to preach only those parts of the Bible that personally interest us. We need to resist that temptation. God has breathed out all Scripture, which means every bit of it is profitable for shaping us into mature Christians who know how to live for Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15-17). That doesn't mean you should preach a verse-by-verse exposition of Genesis–Deuteronomy, but it does mean you shouldn't limit your preaching of the Pentateuch only to those parts you like, or that you think your people will like. From the grandeur of the creation account to the identification of the short-eared owl as covenantally unclean, God inspired all of it for the benefit of his people. Which means we should find a way to preach it all.

2. DON'T PREACH THE PENTATEUCH AS THE BOOKS OF MOSES INSTEAD OF THE BOOK OF MOSES.

The Pentateuch isn't so much five books as it is one book. We're meant to understand it as a whole. Multiple considerations support the Pentateuch's unity: the fivefold division was likely the practical result of scroll length; each of the books presupposes knowledge of the others; it seems to have an overall literary structure hinging on four major poetic sections; plus, later biblical revelation consistently considers the Pentateuch to be a unit. On this last point, tellingly, the Pentateuch is never referred to as the *books* (plural) of Moses but always the *book* (singular) of Moses (e.g., 2 Chron. 25:4; Ezra 6:18; Neh. 13:1; Mark 12:26).

So what does the Pentateuch's unity mean for our preaching? It means we must grapple not just with the message of each book

on its own but in relation to the others. It means we should give thought to the plot and meaning of the Pentateuch as a whole. It means we can't interpret our preaching text in isolation from the entire story Moses has built around it. It's all meant to be understood together.

Lots of exciting work is being done on the message of the Pentateuch, and this article isn't the place to survey the arguments (nor am I qualified to do so). But it might be helpful for me to highlight three key observations that seem foolish to ignore.

First, the story of the Pentateuch follows a covenantal plotline. After the fall of Adam, God promises to send a redeemer—an offspring of a woman to bruise the head of the serpent. This divine promise unfolds through a covenant with Noah, then Abraham, and finally with Israel. We need to understand how our preaching text fits within this covenantal plotline.

Second, the Pentateuch ends on a sad note: God prophesies Israel's failure under the law, Moses dies, and God's covenantal promises of a redeemer-offspring, land, and international blessing remain unfulfilled. If the Pentateuch were a play, it would be a tragedy! So any kind of triumphalist "you-can-do-it" preaching from the Pentateuch will be out of step with the work as a whole.

Third, Israel's failure and the unfulfilled promises seem designed to stir up faith and hope within those who read the Pentateuch. Faith—because God's people shouldn't trust in their ability to keep the law. Even while living under the law, they should follow in the steps of Abraham, who believed God and whose *faith* was counted as righteousness. Hope—because God keeps his promises, and his covenant promises haven't yet come to pass at the end of Deuteronomy. Where is the redeemer-offspring? We need him! Surely God will send him soon.

In short, the overall effect of the Pentateuch should be an erosion of self-reliance and an encouragement to trust in God, longing for the arrival of his promised redeemer. The preacher who

approaches the Pentateuch as a disunified collection of books rather than as “the book of Moses” will likely miss this message.

3. DON'T PREACH THE STORIES OF THE PENTATEUCH AS MERE MORAL LESSONS.

If we miss the main message of the Pentateuch, we'll fail to see how the parts connect to the whole. Consequently, we'll interpret the stories in isolation from the covenant plotline and totally miss how each one either advances or threatens God's redemptive promises. All we'll be left with is moral lessons about how to act or not act.

For instance, is Sarah's barrenness merely an example of how to deal with disappointment in life? Is sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau merely an occasion to encourage families to get along? Is the Red Sea merely an opportunity to preach on how a miracle-working God can get us out of impossible situations? Is the bad report of the spies merely a chance to challenge people not to doubt their destiny?

I need to put in a good word for moral living. Being moral, as God defines it, is a good thing. Three cheers for morality! The Bible itself instructs us to learn from the examples of Israel that we see in the Pentateuch (1 Cor. 10:1–11). But morality is never an end in itself, and the stories of the Pentateuch aren't told so that we'll all just be better people. There's no such thing as *mere* morality in the Bible.

So to answer the questions above: no. None of the stories I mentioned—nor any of the ones I didn't—are given to us merely as moral lessons for living a good life. Moral wisdom will present itself to us as we interpret the stories, and insofar as it accords with life in Christ, we may preach it. But we must not confuse these secondary insights with primary meaning. In order to discern the intended meaning of the story, we must interpret it in light of

the whole story of the Pentateuch, set within the context of the entire Bible.

Take Sarah's barrenness as a case study. No doubt her barrenness was a source of disappointment to her. Most people will be able to connect with her disappointment through whatever lack they've experienced in their own lives. Seeing how God provided for Sarah will encourage them to trust the Lord. That's not a bad moral lesson.

However, the real issue in the story is far more significant to their well-being than merely seeing an encouraging example of God's provision. The real issue in the story has to do with how Sarah's barrenness posed a threat to God's covenant promises. God had promised to make Abraham the father of a multitude, and that he and his offspring would inherit the land, bless the nations, and enjoy God forever. And yet . . . Abraham's wife was barren! Would God fulfill his promises? If so, how? And if not, is there any hope for redemption?

Miraculously, God opened 90-year-old Sarah's womb and gave her Isaac. The threat of barrenness was wonderfully averted, and God's covenant promises continued on toward fulfillment in Israel and ultimately in *the* offspring of Abraham, Christ Jesus himself. Understanding this story in light of both the Pentateuch and the entire Bible reveals its real significance: if God doesn't overcome Sarah's barrenness, his promises will have failed, Jesus never enters the world, and we cannot be saved.

If we're to preach the gospel and not just mere morality, we must connect the parts to the whole. We must interpret each individual story in light of the whole story of both the Pentateuch and the entire Bible.

4. DON'T PREACH THE LAW AS IF WE'RE STILL UNDER THE OLD COVENANT.

You can't talk about preaching the Pentateuch without talking

about how to preach the laws given in association with the old covenant. It's vital to understand that Christians are no longer "under the law" (Gal 5:18). The old covenant is "obsolete," having given way to a new and better covenant in Christ (Heb. 8:13). The result is that we serve God "in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code" (Rom. 7:6).

However, we're not antinomians. Though the law-as-covenant has been rendered obsolete, the laws themselves continue to shape our obedience. The Jerusalem Council, for example, when offering ethical instruction to Gentile believers, distilled laws about sacrifices, idol worship, and sexual immorality (Acts 15:28–29). Paul cites several of the Ten Commandments as exemplary of Christian love (Rom. 13:8–10), and even uses a law about muzzling an ox to commend the payment of pastors (1 Cor. 9:9). Jesus, Paul, and James each make a point of summarizing the believer's ethical life according to the law's great commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31; Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8). Peter quotes from the law when encouraging Christian holiness (1 Pet. 1:15–16). Even the laws that are fulfilled and set aside remain instructive, such as the food laws, which help us understand the true source of human uncleanness and our need to reach the nations (Mark 7:18–23; Acts 10:9–29). Though the law-as-covenant has passed away, the law-as-Scripture remains profitable for the Christian.

Some traditions divide the old covenant into moral, civil, and ceremonial categories, asserting that the so-called moral law is still in effect. Such a division of the law is ultimately unnecessary. As a covenant, none of the law remains in effect. Jesus has fulfilled it all—moral, civil, and ceremonial. But as practical instruction in ethics and wisdom, *all* the law remains useful in shaping the Christian life—not just the Shema and the Ten Commandments! We must simply preach each law in light of its fulfillment in Christ.

5. DON'T PREACH ANY PART OF THE PENTATEUCH AS IF JESUS HASN'T COME.

This pitfall is the most crucial to avoid. Just about everything else in this article comes down to this. Don't preach any part of the Pentateuch as if Jesus hasn't come. Take up every bit of Genesis–Deuteronomy, interpret it in light of the whole, and show how it points to Christ and finds its fulfillment in him.

No doubt you've seen the "You Had One Job" memes. As Christian preachers, we have one job: *preach Christ!* We're to preach Christ from the Prophets, preach Christ from the Writings, preach Christ from the Gospels, preach Christ from the letters, preach Christ from Revelation. And we're to preach him from the Pentateuch, too! Which shouldn't be too hard to do, for according to Jesus, "Moses wrote of me" (John 5:46).

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How Not to Preach Historical Narrative



Sam Emadi

Despite making up roughly 40 percent of the Old Testament, historical narratives are often a locked box for many evangelicals, including preachers.

The biggest question we need to answer when preaching historical narratives is “what is the *meaning* of these *events*?” And given that these narratives often don’t come with explanatory theological commentary, how do we determine the *meaning* of the *event*?

Below I’ll discuss ways you shouldn’t preach historical narrative, illustrating each point by primarily looking at 1 Samuel 4–7: the battle of Aphek, the conflict between Dagon and Yahweh, and the battle of Ebenezer. If you haven’t read those chapters in a while, I’d encourage you to give them a look.

1. DON'T CREATE YOUR OWN VERSION OF THE STORY.

Preach the text, not historical backgrounds. Sometimes preachers are more fascinated by their historical reconstruction of the events described in Scripture than by the actual words of Scripture. Describing the landscape of Aphek or postulating why the Philistines chose to attack along a specific route may help our understanding of the text, but emphasize the text. Never let your historical reconstruction overwhelm the story *as God told it* in Scripture.

2. DON'T ISOLATE IT FROM EARLIER STORIES,

The basic rule of interpretation is context, context, context. Before you jump straight to Jesus, consider how your story develops previous themes in Scripture. Or consider how it mirrors previous events, or assumes an already established understanding of characters and motivations.

For instance, a number of scholars have ridiculed the notion that Rahab's scarlet cord foreshadows the blood of Christ. Certainly, some preachers have approached the connection between the two events fancifully. But the relationship between Rahab's cord and the cross isn't as far-fetched when we read Joshua in light of earlier stories. Joshua 2 shares a number of linguistic and thematic parallels with Exodus 12, including the fact that both the scarlet cord in the window and the Passover blood on the doorpost are called "signs" of God's deliverance (Exod 12:13; Josh 2:12). These allusions and a number of other features in the early chapters of Joshua invite readers to see Rahab's salvation as a new Passover. Yet astoundingly in this Passover God isn't saving his people from Egypt but making a Gentile prostitute part of the people of God.²

2 For more on the relationship between Joshua 2 and Exodus 12 see David Schrock, "What Designates a Valid Type? A Christotelic, Covenantal Proposal." *Southeastern Theological Review* 5, no. 1 (2014): 3–26; Peter Leithart, "Passover and the Structure of Joshua 2." *Biblical Horizons* 99 (November 1997).

Of course, not every detail in the text produces such rich theological connections, but reading in light of earlier narratives still helps your congregation understand the logic and drama of the story. Consider the first verses of 1 Samuel 4. After the Philistines slaughter 4,000 Israelites on the battlefield, the Israelites ask that the Ark of the Covenant join the military on the front lines (1 Sam 4:3). But as the Ark arrives the narrator offers an important detail: “the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God” (1 Sam. 4:4).

Cue the foreboding music. If we’ve been paying attention to previous stories, we know Hophni and Phinehas’ presence is an ominous one. These sons of Eli are symbols of Israel’s covenant infidelity (1 Sam. 2:12–17), the failure of the priesthood (1 Sam. 2:27–36), and the Lord’s impending judgment (1 Sam. 2:34). They represent death, when what Israel really needs is resurrection.

3. DON'T FORGET THE COVENANTS.

Scholars sometimes note that Old Testament narrators are characterized by reticence. In other words, the way they tell stories is suggestive and allusive; they don’t often break the fourth wall and tell readers “the point.” On occasion, the narrator breaks in with an explanatory comment, like the ominous conclusion to the story of David’s sin with Bathsheba —“the thing that David had done displeased the Lord” (2 Sam. 11:27). But these instances are remarkable precisely because they’re the exception, not the rule.

So how do we know “God’s perspective” on the *meaning* of the events recorded in Scripture if the authors don’t always tell us? Simple, we read each story in light of all of Scripture, particularly in light of the covenants. In the covenants, God defines his relationship with his people through promises, laws, blessings, and warnings. The covenants provide us a set of *expectations*. They give us an interpretive lens to assess what’s happening. In other

words, they give us the divine perspective on Israel's history. We don't ultimately need to be told that David's actions with Bathsheba are evil; the covenants *already* tell us as much (Exod. 20:14, 17; Deut. 17:17). The fact that the author underscores God's response signals that God is *mega*-displeased with David.

The covenants reveal the *meaning* of the *event*. When God blesses Potiphar on account of Joseph, he's fulfilling his promise to Abraham to bless the nations (Gen. 12:3). When Moses tells us that Israel was "fruitful and multiplied greatly" in the land of Goshen (Gen. 47:27), he's not randomly noting Hebrew fertility rates. He's recalling the Adamic commission of the creation covenant (Gen. 1:28) and the seed promise of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:2; 17:2). God is fulfilling through Israel his purposes for creation he began with Adam. When the narrator chronicles Solomon's many horses in 1 Kings 4:26, previous injunctions in the Mosaic covenant show us God is ultimately displeased with Solomon's actions (Deut. 17:14–17)—even if God's displeasure isn't mentioned in the immediate context.

Consider how the covenants inform our understanding of 1 Samuel 4. Israel is living in disobedience. The word of the Lord is rare (1 Sam 3:1). The priests are corrupt (1 Sam 2:12–36). Amidst all this, the covenants show us exactly what we should expect. When Israel disobeys, God sends judgment through foreign militaries (Deut. 28:25–26). Israel's defeat under the Philistines isn't mere happenstance, but the judgment of God against their corruption. The Lord is enacting covenant curses against the nation. Of course, 1 Samuel 4 never explicitly says that the Philistines are God's instrument of judgment. But by reading in light of the covenants we see the *meaning* of this *event*. And, of course, the covenant sets up our expectations for what follows. If Israel continues in their wickedness they will be exiled from the land (Deut. 28:36).

4. DON'T MISS WHAT GOD IS DOING,

Closely related to the previous point, don't forget to ask: What is *God* doing in the story? It's so easy to get caught up in the human drama we sometimes forget to see what these stories show us about the character of God and his purposes in the world.

Once again, the covenants provide the framework to understand what God is doing in redemptive history, even when the biblical authors don't explicitly tell us.

For example, Joshua's victory in the battle of Jericho shows us something of Joshua's unwavering faith. But even more, the battle shows us that God fights for his people and fulfills covenant promises. David's victory over Goliath is truly a story of faith and courage. But even more, it's a story of how God uses the weak things of the world to shame the wise, and how he mediates his own victory through a messianic king to his people.³

Back to 1 Samuel and the battle of Aphek. What happens to the book's main characters—Hannah, Samuel, and Eli—after this? *They completely disappear from the story.* Instead, the author focuses on the Ark of the Covenant, a symbolic stand-in for Yahweh himself (Exod. 25:22). At this point, the narrator subverts our expectations. We expect the Philistines to carry Israel off into exile, yet Israel remains in the land. Instead, the Philistines take the Ark of the Covenant into exile, placing it in the temple of Dagon like a defeated, humiliated deity (1 Sam. 5:1–2).

But in this exile and apparent weakness, Yahweh shows his strength. He topples Dagon and cuts off his hands. After defeating Dagon, he goes after Dagon's people—moving from city to city utterly destroying the Philistines and accomplishing what Israel never could.

The story is one of substitution. Yahweh himself undergoes Israel's covenant curses in their place—an idea alluded to as far

³ David and Goliath's conflict is a small-scale reproduction of Yahweh's battle with Dagon in 1 Samuel 5. Both Dagon's and Goliath's heads roll. The Philistine meets the same fate as his God.

back as Genesis 15:17. Yahweh is exiled in Israel's place and then from a place of apparent weakness defeats Israel's enemies.

Preach what *God* is doing in each Old Testament story. What God does in Christ in the New Testament is foreshadowed in the old (1 Cor. 15:3–4).

5. DON'T IGNORE THE LITERARY FEATURES OF THE STORY.

The biblical authors employ a number of literary features in historical narrative. Here's a sampling:

- Parallelism (Abraham and Isaac's encounters with Abimelech [Gen. 20; 26]).
- Inclusio [Joseph's brothers bowing to him at the beginning and end of the Joseph story [Gen: 37:6–8 and 50:18]).
- Creative use of numbers (the fivefold "curse" in Gen. 1–11 contrasted with the fivefold "blessing" in Gen. 12:1–3)
- Sandwiched stories (Judah's story in Gen. 38 sandwiched by Joseph stories [Gen 37; 39–41])
- Narrative patterns (cycle of the judges).

One literary feature in biblical narrative is verbal repetition. In 1 Samuel 5 consider the author's repeated mention of *hands*. Yahweh cuts off Dagon's "hands"—symbols of strength and authority (1 Sam 5:4; cf. Isa. 14:27; 41:20; Acts 4:28). The author repeats the word "hands" four times in the next seven verses, focusing on Yahweh's powerful hands: "The hand of the Lord was heavy against the people of Ashdod" (6, 7, 9, 11).⁴ The verbal repetition underscores the *meaning* of the *event*. The Philistines think Dagon has the upper-hand on Yahweh, but Yahweh shows Dagon

⁴ Further, the paragraph following the destruction of Dagon (1 Sam 5:6–12) both begins and ends with the "the hand of the Lord was heavy" (vv. 6, 12) forming an inclusio around the passage.

has no hands at all. Dagon's hands are weightless, impotent, shattered. The Lord's hand is heavy, strong, and effectual.

6. DON'T MISS THE STRUCTURE,

You don't need to sketch out the structure of a passage on a white board for your congregation. And I'm not suggesting you pepper your sermons with language like "this story is a chiasm." Most of the time, explaining a complex literary structure just before lunch on Sunday morning is not the wisest homiletical decision. But understanding the structure may help unlock the *meaning* of the *event* and help you explain its significance to your people.

For instance, the stories in 1 Samuel 4–7 *are* a chiasm.

A Battle of Aphek (Philistine victory), 4:1b–11

B Ark captured and exiled 4:12–22

C Ark in Philistia (plagues), 5:1–12

D Return of Ark, 6:1–18

C' Ark in Beth Shemesh (plagues), 6:19–21

B' Ark in Kiriath-jearim, 7:1–2

A' Battle of Ebenezer (Israelite Victory), 7:3–17⁵

The parallels between each corresponding section should enhance our understanding of each narrative. Consider the sections C and C'. When Israelite priests receive the Ark into Beth-Shemesh in 6:19–21, they treat it with no more reverence than the

⁵ Peter Leithart, *A Son to Me: An Exposition of 1 & 2 Samuel*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003.

Philistines in 5:1–12. The result is the same: God judges the Israelites just as he did the Philistines (1 Sam 6:19). Just as the Philistines endeavored to get rid of the Ark, the Israelites do the same (1 Sam 6:21). Even Israel’s priests are no better than Philistines. They reflect the surrounding pagan nations. No wonder, Israel will eventually want a “king like the nations,” a man who himself turns out to be a cheap imitation of a Philistine giant.⁶

Or consider the A-Sections. Did you notice how the last line reverses the events of the first? Once again, the Philistines and Israel have gathered at Aphek for war. But this time, Israel has genuinely repented of sin—they put away their idols and “served the Lord only” (1 Sam 7:4). The rest of the chapter describes Israel’s victory over the Philistines in a way that recalls and reverses the Philistine victory over Israel.

Don’t believe me? Consider the following details. In 1 Samuel 4, the Israelites thunder and shout (1 Sam 4:5). But in this final battle, the Israelites are silent while Yahweh himself “thundered with a mighty sound” (1 Sam. 7:10). In the first battle, the Philistines feared the shouts of Israel but ultimately won the day (1 Sam. 4:7). In 1 Samuel 7, Israel fears the Philistines, but the Lord gives them victory (1 Sam. 7:7). In 1 Samuel 4 a child of Israel is named “Ichabod,” which means “the glory of the Lord is gone.” But in 1 Samuel 7, they set up an altar and call it “Ebenezer,” which means “the Lord has helped us.”

Comparing these parallel stories reveals something important: Israel’s victory doesn’t rest on military might, but on their worship of Yahweh. Israel isn’t victorious because they have the better army but because they repent of their sin. The arm of the flesh leads to ruin; repentance leads to glory.

⁶ Saul is just what Israel asked for, a king “like all the nations” (1 Sam. 8:5). He is renowned, not for his godliness and character, but, like Goliath, for his height (1 Sam. 9:2). Like Goliath and the Philistines, Saul uses a spear (1 Sam 18:10)—a spear that he turns against his own people (1 Sam. 22:17–19).

7. DON'T SHY AWAY FROM POINTING TO BIBLICAL CHARACTERS AS POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE EXAMPLES.

As Jason Hood demonstrates in his article, Scripture itself teaches we should preach biblical figures as positive and negative moral examples. Paul said the Israelites who died in the wilderness were “examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did” (1 Cor. 10:6).

The battles of Aphek and Ebenezer are chock-full of negative examples—sinners with whom we easily identify. The Israelite soldiers in chapter 4 are superstitious, treating the Ark of the Covenant like a lucky charm. The members of your church may not rub lucky rabbit’s feet to make them feel safe, but they might look to their bank accounts or other things they own to bring them good fortune. The priests in Beth-Shemesh are obstinate, indifferent to God’s law and thus consumed by his holiness. Those listening to your sermon should know the same: we must not treat God’s law flippantly or his holiness lightly.

The stories are also filled with positive examples—saints whom we should aspire to imitate. Samuel stands out. He’s a model of patience and fidelity in ministry, characterized by speaking the word of God (1 Sam. 4:1) and prayer (1 Sam. 7:5). He begins his preaching ministry in 1 Samuel 4:1 but only begins to see fruit from his labors *over twenty years later* (1 Sam 7:2). Christians who might feel discouraged by the apparent lack of fruit should remember this: Samuel labored for over 20 years just to get Israel to obey the first commandment (1 Sam. 7:4)!

8. DON'T ASSUME THERE'S ONLY ONE WAY TO GET TO JESUS,

While preaching through Old Testament narrative, preachers committed to Christ-centered exposition are often only on the

lookout for types. But there are many hermeneutically legitimate paths to Jesus. Sidney Griedanus' seven suggestions are a particularly helpful catalog:⁷

- *Redemptive-Historical Progression*. How does this story develop redemptive history in a way that ultimately culminates in Jesus Christ?
- *Promise-Fulfillment*. Is there a promise in the text fulfilled by Christ?
- *Typology*. Is there a divinely orchestrated pattern of events or an institution that prophetically foreshadows the person and work of Christ?
- *Analogy*. Do any parallels exist between laws, promises, or situations found in the story and the laws, promises, or situations we find ourselves in as God's New Covenant people?
- *Longitudinal Themes*. Does this text develop any significant biblical-theological themes (temple, kingship, priesthood, etc.) that are ultimately fulfilled in Christ?
- *New Testament References*. Is this passage quoted anywhere in the New Testament?
- *Contrast*. What aspects of this text contrast with Christ's person and work or the glories of the New Covenant?

By using these seven categories, we can see a number of ways 1 Samuel 4–7 finds its fulfillment in Christ. We've already noted how the Ark of the Covenant goes into exile to defeat Israel's enemies—a type or pattern fulfilled in Christ. But preachers can point to the gospel in other ways.

- *Redemptive Historical Progression*. 1 Samuel 4–7 takes place at the end of the period of the judges, when “there was

⁷ For more see Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

no king in Israel [and] everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 21:25). Israel needs David. They need a king to lead them in obeying God’s law—a king we now have in Christ.

- *Analogy.* Israel responded to Samuel’s preaching with repentance and worship. God requires us to respond to his Word in the same way.
- *Longitudinal Themes.* Throughout the Old Testament, God presents himself as a warrior-king saving his people by judging their enemies—something alluded to as early as Genesis 3:15. The exodus from Egypt is perhaps the most prominent occurrence of this pattern—one the Philistines themselves are aware of (1 Sam. 4:8). In 1 Samuel 4–7, God delivers Israel from the Philistines by fighting on their behalf. This longitudinal theme —“God the Warrior-king”—culminates in Christ when “[God] disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him” (Col. 2:15).
- *Contrast.* Eli, Hophni, and Phinehas are wicked priests who have failed to spiritually care for the nation. Israel is corrupt from the top down. The church, however, has a faithful high priest who never leads us into sin and always cares for his people.

“SWIFT IN THE BOOKS”

In truth, the key to preaching any passage of Scripture is to immerse yourself in all of Scripture. As preachers, our aim should be to imitate Ezra: “He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses” (Ezra 7:6). The phrase “skilled scribe” carries the connotation that Ezra was “swift in the books.” In other words, Ezra knew his Bible.

Historical narratives are a rich, faith-fueling section of the Bible that authentically point us to the person and work of Christ.

Preaching Old Testament narrative is a daunting task, but these stories remind us that God keeps his promises, even in times it seems his Word has failed.

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How Not to Preach the Psalms



Jim Hamilton

I typically don't like "How Not To" articles. They lend themselves to sounding as if some arrogant know-it-all is telling everyone about all the mistakes they've made. It's not my purpose to make you regret sermons you've preached or derive some sick pleasure in playing the elitist. I'm certainly not trying to put distance between you and the Psalter you love.

I have one big idea here that I want to make specific in a series of ways. The big idea is this: don't preach the Psalms in isolation.

DON'T PREACH THE PSALMS IN ISOLATION

Preachers often read the psalms without regard for their various contexts. But we shouldn't isolate individual statements within a psalm from the literary structure of the whole psalm, we shouldn't isolate individual psalms from their context in the book, and we

shouldn't isolate the Psalter as a whole from either the rest of the Old Testament or the New Testament. So here comes a list of "Don'ts" that all have to do with not isolating the psalms from the context intended by their authors.

Just to be clear: I think the individual psalmists intended phrases and lines to be read in the context of the whole psalm, and I think the person(s) who put the whole Psalter together did so purposefully and intended for readers to interpret the psalms in a particular order. This ordering of the Psalter engages patterns and promises found in the rest of the Old Testament, and those who ordered the Psalter intended to provoke the very hopes and expectations for which we find the New Testament claiming fulfillment.

DON'T PREACH A PSALM IN ISOLATION FROM ITS LITERARY CONTEXT

The psalmists were poets, and words fitly spoken are apples of gold in settings of silver (Prov. 25:11). If you want to see the gold in the beauty intended by the author, you have to consider it in its setting of silver. In other words, if you want to understand a particular line in a psalm, you have to understand the literary structure of the individual one you're reading.

Take Psalm 12:6, for instance, which extols the purity of God's words. How does that line fit in the context of Psalm 12? Often, biblical material is structured chiasmically, so that the first and last statements correspond to and exposit each other, as do the second and second to last, the third and third to last (and so forth). In this structure, the key statements are situated in the middle. Often these central statements reach back to the beginning and anticipate the end. Consider how this works in Psalm 12. The Psalm's chiasmic structure looks like this:

12:1, The Vanishing Faithful

12:2–4, The Empty Words of the Wicked

12:5, Yahweh Promises to Vindicate the Poor and Needy

12:6–7, The Pure Words of the Lord

12:8, The Strutting Wicked

The first verse speaks of how the godly and faithful are endangered, and the last verse speaks of how the wicked strut about. In verses 2–4 we find statements about liars with their flattery and boasting contrasted with a celebration of God’s pure words in 12:6–7. At the center of Psalm 12 (v. 5), Yahweh declares that he will arise to deliver the endangered faithful from verse 1 and address the strutting wicked of verse 8. Verses 6–7, then, not only celebrate God’s pure words in contrast to the lies and boasts of the wicked in verses 2–4, they also confess faith that God will keep the promise he makes in verse 5.

In your preaching, don’t miss the literary structures—structures full of beauty that communicate meaning—the psalmists have built.

DON’T PREACH INDIVIDUAL PSALMS IN ISOLATION FROM THE WHOLE BOOK OF PSALMS

My counsel here pertains not merely to the flow of thought from one psalm to another (on that point refer to my sermon on Psalms 42–48 here). In addition to these kinds of connections between adjacent psalms, there are wide-angle connections between distant psalms. Noting these connections can help us make sense of some of the more difficult statements in the Psalter.

For instance, Psalm 137:9 is pretty shocking: “Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” There’s an important connection between the word “dashes” here and the same Hebrew verb in Psalm 2:9, “You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” This linguistic point of contact shows us that Psalm 137 blesses the future king from David’s line to whom the Lord speaks in Psalm 2. Further, Psalm 2:10 gave fair warning to rebel kings, urging them to be wise and submit to the Lord’s anointed king lest they “perish in the way” (2:10–12). Psalm 137:9 graphically and—dare I say it—*mercifully* warns the wicked who refuse to repent of what will happen to them and to their children if they refuse to heed Psalm 2’s admonition to “Kiss the son” and “take refuge in him” (2:12).

In a very real sense, the context for every line in the Psalter is not only the whole psalm but *the whole Psalter*.

DON'T PREACH THE PSALMS IN ISOLATION FROM THE REST OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Here’s the most important sentence in this article: *The most important background for understanding psalms is earlier Scripture.* Consider Psalm 29. David starts by calling the “sons of God” (see ESV footnote) to ascribe glory to Yahweh (29:1–2). Then he celebrates the power of Yahweh’s voice (29:3–9), before speaking of Yahweh sitting enthroned over the flood (29:10–11).

Where else do we see this same imagery? Recall Genesis 6–9. The LORD who sits enthroned over the flood in Psalm 29:10 is the same LORD who sits enthroned in the heavens, laughing at those who plot to overthrow him and his Messiah in Psalm 2:1–4.

The Psalms point not only backward to earlier Scripture, as when David prays that the blessing of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3) will be fulfilled in the king God has promised to raise up from his line (2 Sam. 7:14) in Psalm 72:17 (cf. esp. Gen. 12:3; 2 Sam. 7:9),

but also forward to later Scripture. For example, David, who lived around 1000 BC, prayed in Psalm 72:8 that the future king from his line would “have dominion [cf. Gen. 1:28] from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth.” After the return from exile, around 520 BC Zechariah prophesied that when the Lord brought the king, “humble and mounted on a donkey” (Zech. 9:9), that king would rule “from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth” (Zech. 9:10). Zechariah quotes Psalm 72 as he prophesies of the future king from David’s line.

DON’T READ THE PSALMS IN ISOLATION FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament authors read the Psalms typologically. They recognize patterns in redemptive history that are ultimately fulfilled in Jesus. For instance, David really was betrayed by a close friend whom he trusted, someone who ate his bread and then later lifted his heel against David (Ps 41:9). David may refer to someone like Ahithophel, who was David’s own counselor, but who joined Absalom’s revolt in an attempt to overthrow David (see 2 Sam 15–17). So in Psalm 41 David describes his own experience. But he also sees a correspondence between his experience and the experience of earlier figures like Joseph and Moses, who were also rejected and opposed by their own kinsmen, even those closest to them (Joseph’s brothers, Gen 37; Miriam and Aaron, Num 12). Is it too much to suppose that David expected that the pattern seen in Joseph, repeated in Moses and then in David, would be fulfilled in the experience of the king God promised to raise up from his line?

On the basis of having worked through the entirety of the Psalter testing this hypothesis, I propose that this is exactly what David is doing in his psalms: he’s describing his own experience, but he understands that his own experience is an installation of a

pattern of events seen previously in the Scriptures, and he expects that pattern to find fulfillment in the seed God has promised to him (see, e.g., Ps 18:50).

So, in John 13, Jesus begins to warn his disciples that one of them will betray him with the words, “But the Scripture will be fulfilled, ‘He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me’” (John 13:18, quoting Psalm 41:9). David was not predicting the future in Psalm 41:9; he was describing his own experience. And Jesus is not claiming a fulfillment of a future prediction in John 13:18, but rather the fulfillment of a typological pattern. Like David, Jesus understood the typological correspondence between Joseph, Moses, and David, and Jesus knew that what they prefigured and foreshadowed would be fulfilled in him. And this, I contend, is fully in keeping with what David intended to communicate in Psalm 41.

Don’t preach the Psalms in isolation—from their immediate or broad context. May God bless his Word in your mouth, and may the sentiments in the Psalms be the heartbeat of God’s people.⁸

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⁸ This section has been adapted from my forthcoming commentary *Psalms*. 2 vols. BTCP. Bellingham: Lexham.

How Not to Preach the Old Testament Prophets



Nick Roark

Preaching faithfully from the Old Testament is always a challenge. But preaching faithfully from the Old Testament Prophets is perhaps most challenging of all. “The books of Israel’s prophets are among the most difficult in the Old Testament, and probably among the most difficult books ever written.”⁹ Luther agreed: ““The prophets have a queer way of talking, like people who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next, so that you cannot make head or tail of them or see what they are getting at.”¹⁰

Yet, despite the difficulty, we cannot neglect or avoid preaching the Prophets if we seek to declare to our people the whole coun-

9 Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), 124.

10 Martin Luther, quoted in Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 33. (Luther’s Works, Weimar edition, Volume 19: 350).

sel of God (Acts 20:27). Instead of telling you what *to do*, here is a brief list of what *not to do* when preaching from the Prophets. Consider the following a “not-to-do” checklist.

1. DON'T PREACH ABOUT *THE PROPHET*. PREACH THE MESSAGE OF *THE PROPHETIC BOOK*.

The first thing *not* to do when preaching from the Old Testament Prophets is to preach *about* the prophet. Instead preach the *message* of the divinely inspired book that bears the prophet's name.

The Old Testament prophets are colorful characters. Isaiah stripped off all his clothes and wandered around naked for three years (Isaiah 20:1–3). Jonah, the stubborn prophet, fled in a boat from the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land (Jonah 1:1–3). Jeremiah hid his linen loincloth in a cleft of the rock by the Euphrates River (Jeremiah 13:1–6). Hosea dutifully married a prostitute in obedience to the Lord's command (Hosea 1:2–3). With such interesting biographical material as this to work with, it's easy for the preacher to be seduced into treating the Prophets as if they were a form of ancient Israelite memoir. But the prophetic books *aren't* biographies of the prophets. In many instances, we know only scant details about their personal lives.

Instead of preaching about *the prophets*, the task of the faithful expositor is to proclaim the message of the God-breathed *prophetic books*, the sacred writings, which are able to make your hearers wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:15; 4:2). This requires prayerful and careful reading and rereading of the prophetic books, meditating day and night (Psalm 1), as well as asking for and receiving wisdom from the Lord Himself. For: “Whoever is wise, let him understand these things; whoever is discerning, let him know them; for the ways of the LORD are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them” (Hosea 14:9).

2. DON'T FOCUS *EXCLUSIVELY* UPON ISRAEL. HIGHLIGHT GOD'S GLORIOUS GLOBAL PURPOSES FOR ALL NATIONS.

The second thing *not* to do when preaching from the Old Testament Prophets is to focus *exclusively* upon Israel. It's easy to read the Prophets and come away thinking these books are *solely* about the Lord's ancient dealings with the people of Israel. After reading the prophetic books, some Christians might even begin to feel like they've been reading someone else's mail! After all, to the Israelites "belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen" (Romans 9:4–5).

Certainly, the prophetic books inform us of historical events that occurred in Israel's past. But Israel's past was the divine canvas on which God painted his plans for the future.¹¹ Israel's past is the prologue for the world. The Lord's divine plans for the future not only feature Israel, but also highlight God's glorious global purposes for all nations. The Prophets proclaim the vision of the last days found in the Pentateuch, where God promises to bless the whole world through Abraham and his offspring (Genesis 12:3; 22:17–18; 49:10; Galatians 3:16).

This glorious hope isn't intended only to summon the house of Jacob to walk in the light of the LORD. God also intends that His salvation reach to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 2:2–5; 49:6; 52:10). Not only is the whole world presently filled with His glory (Isaiah 6:3), but one day in the future "the earth will be filled with *the knowledge* of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14). One day, the heavens and the earth will be made new (Isaiah 65:17). You must proclaim this global good news when you preach the Prophets.

¹¹ John Sailhamer, *Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 47.

3. DON'T JUST PREACH DIVINE JUDGMENT. POINT TO CHRIST AND THE BRIGHT HOPE OF THE NEW COVENANT.

Prophetic preaching is often associated with the earnest proclamation of impending doom. And for good reason! The theme of divine judgment spans the breadth of the Prophets. If you seek to preach expositionally through the prophetic books, then you must faithfully address God's anger towards the sins of His people. Disobedience has consequences. And the prophets constantly remind God's unfaithful people of the curses for disobedience that were first promised in Deuteronomy 28. In this way, preaching from the prophetic books often involves an exegesis of an exegesis, because the prophetic books interpret and apply earlier biblical texts. This is why the prophetic books are brimming with Bible.

But just as the Prophets interpret and apply the Pentateuch's warnings of divine judgment for disobedience, they also marvelously illuminate the glorious hope of the coming Messiah and the promise of the new covenant. Atop the dark backdrop of the failure of God's people to believe and obey his Word rests the bright vision of the forever Davidic King and the establishment of a his forever kingdom through a new covenant (Isaiah 9:6–7; Jeremiah 31:32–34). The glorious global purposes of God revealed in the Prophets look beyond the ravages of the exile and center on the arrival of this future King like David (Ezek. 34:23).

Elsewhere, the Lord says that this new covenant will involve a regathering of his people through a kind of new exodus (Ezek. 36:26–28; cf. Deut. 30:3–4) and a pouring out of his Spirit in a fresh way, such that all the people of God will be given new hearts to trust and obey their King (Joel 2:28–29; Acts 2:14–21). The prophets even hold out the hope that the King of all creation will bring about a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth in which all the nations shall worship before the Lord (Isa. 65:17; 66:22–23).

Any faithful preaching of the prophetic books must include consistently pointing our people to Jesus Christ, the seed of Abraham, the son of David, the prophet like Moses, the Suffering Servant, who was obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross, who inaugurated the new covenant and purchased the church of God with His own blood (Luke 22:20; Acts 20:28). “He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:5-6)

Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, taught His disciples to look for Him in the Prophets. “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27; see also 1 Peter 1:10–12). So preach the Prophets by pointing your hearers to the Coming One whom the Old Testament prophets all longed to see. “To Him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through His name” (Acts 10:43).

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How Not to Preach Wisdom Literature



Juan Sanchez

When was the last time you preached through wisdom literature? Think about it for a moment. Look back over your preaching calendar if you need to. I was forced to ask myself this question a few years ago. I'm committed to preaching through books of the Bible in their entirety. I'm also committed to preaching the whole counsel of God, so we alternate regularly between the Old and New Testaments *and* through the various genres of Scripture. Despite all that, I found that I had neglected wisdom literature.

I'm sure there are any number of reasons why. After all, who wants to preach through Song of Solomon on Sunday mornings to a mixed-gender, multi-generational, multi-ethnic congregation? Sure, like most pastors, I preached through a few wisdom Psalms here and there—mostly on Sunday nights or during the summer. Job? Well, that's a long book—42 chapters, to be exact,

and not the most encouraging either. And while we're speaking of not encouraging, how much more negative can you get than Ecclesiastes? "Nothing new here! Oh, and by the way, every pursuit is empty, and life is a vapor!" Thanks, but no thanks! Now, I must admit that Proverbs is pretty practical stuff, right? But preaching it without sounding like Dr. Phil? That poses its own challenges.

WHY PREACH WISDOM LITERATURE

Maybe you're much more mature than me. Maybe you've preached through all of Job, the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. I, on the other hand, had to come to terms that if the Bible is God's Word, sufficient and without error, then I must preach all of it—including wisdom literature. It's part of the divinely inspired canon. It's God's Word. And when we stand before God and give an account, we must be able to say with the apostle Paul that we held nothing back. Our hands are clean of their blood because we preached the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:26–27).

So, knowing we need to preach wisdom literature, let's consider three overarching questions that will help us preach it faithfully.

1. Ask yourself: what was the original author communicating to his audience?

In other words, what did the message mean to *them* in their *then*? This requires the hard work of exegesis. Once you've identified the type of text you're working with (discourse, narrative, or poetry), utilize the strategies that type of text requires. If you're working through Proverbs, for example, it's mainly poetry. You will need to understand certain characteristics of poetry—parallelism, images, stanzas, etc.—to understand the message.

Knowing the characteristics of the genre will help you discern how the author has structured the text or passage. Discerning

structure will reveal its shape and emphases, which will in turn shape the structure and emphases of your sermon.

And yet, once you've discerned the shape and emphases of your passage, you still need to understand its context: in surrounding passages, in the whole book, and even in the whole Bible. Take Ecclesiastes, for example. At first glance, it's a depressing book. But when you understand that the author is exposing the emptiness of life "under the sun"—a worldview in which there is no God and therefore no heavens—it begins to make sense. Those who live with a materialistic worldview "under the sun" will find their search for purpose meaningless and their pursuits empty. Instead, our purpose and hope are found in the God who exists in the heavens. It is he whom we should love and fear. Knowing the overarching theme of Ecclesiastes helps identify the argument of the individual passages.

It's also vital to understand historical context. What's going on in the lives of the original hearers that will inform the interpretation of your passage? Sometimes, the literary context answers these questions. Other times, other passages of Scripture shed light. Often, though, a good dictionary, encyclopedia, or commentary can provide the needed historical background that will help you better understand what your passage meant to *them* in their *then*.

For example, Proverbs seems primarily written to Solomon's sons (Proverbs 1:1, 8; 2:1; 3:1; 4:1; 5:1; 6:1; 7:1; 10:1). Solomon seeks to prepare his sons for covenant faithfulness and even kingship. This idea of covenant faithfulness is important for understanding wisdom literature. The Law was given to Moses in the first five books of the Bible, the Torah. The life or death of Israel was contingent on faithful covenant keeping (Exodus 19:5–6). If Israel obeyed the covenant, they would be richly blessed. If they broke the covenant, they would be terribly cursed (Deuteronomy 28). Israel's king was the primary covenant keeper (Isaiah 55:3–4). As the kings of Israel went, so followed the nation.

Wisdom literature was a means for instructing Israel in covenant faithfulness and warning them of the consequences of covenant breaking. If Israel obeyed, they received incredible promises—an abundance of crops, of offspring, and of military triumphs. However, if they disobeyed, God would bring them famine, barrenness, defeat, and exile. Wisdom literature distinguishes the way of wisdom, righteousness, and covenant faithfulness from the way of foolishness, unrighteousness, and covenant breaking. Read in this light, Proverbs has some teeth. They're not mere principles that are often true; they show the path to obtaining the covenant promises.

Answering this first question is often the hardest work in sermon preparation. We're trying to identify what the passage meant to *them* in their *then*. Once you've done that, write out a brief sentence that summarizes the author's main idea. This step is vital because if you're unclear as to the author's point, your sermon's main argument will be unclear to your hearers. Still, while this first question may be the most challenging in the process of sermon preparation, we're only just beginning.

2. Ask yourself: what light does Christ and his coming shed on your text of Scripture?

Wisdom literature in the Old Testament was written in a covenantal context: God's covenant with Israel. But Christ's coming has inaugurated a new covenant. How does this affect how we should read wisdom literature text today?

Before we answer that question, we must remember that before Jesus inaugurated the new covenant, he fulfilled the old covenant. He did so by satisfying its demands fully, thus fulfilling all righteousness. Due to his faithful covenant keeping, Jesus obtained all the covenant blessings. Jesus also fulfilled the old covenant by receiving its curses in the place of covenant-breakers (Galatians 3:13–14). Jesus saved us from the covenant curses by bearing them

in our place; he won for us the covenant blessings through his faithful covenant keeping. In doing so, he fulfilled the old covenant, which was temporary to begin with (Galatians 4:1–7), and he inaugurated the new covenant. Now, with the law written on our hearts and God’s Spirit indwelling us, we are empowered to keep the covenant by walking in the way of wisdom.

This raises a question: is wisdom the same in the old and new covenant? Yes, it is. It’s a divine gift (Proverbs 2:1–7; James 1:5; 3:15). It’s graciously given to us that we may know how to walk in covenant faithfulness (James 3:13–18). It gives us insight into God’s character, purposes, and ways by which we develop a view of the world that helps us discern the path of righteousness. Now, under the new covenant, we walk in the way of wisdom and follow Jesus’ steps in the knowledge and fear of God. We receive all the blessings of the covenant, not on the basis of our covenant faithfulness, but by faith in Jesus, the one who kept the covenant for us.

Sometimes, there will be a direct citation of a portion of your text elsewhere in Scripture. See how other authors understand it, especially if it’s in the New Testament. Other times, you’ll need to trace a theme or type from your text to the New Testament. However you get to Jesus—direct citation, allusion, theme, type, promise-fulfillment, analogy, or contrast—you must reveal Christ and his good news for his people from your text. Otherwise, particularly in Old Testament wisdom literature, you’ll merely be preaching moralistic sermons devoid of power.

3. Finally, ask yourself: what will be my main argument from this passage of Scripture?

The original author’s main point or idea written to *them* in their *then* must now be written for *us* in our *now*. In other words, you want to make the same argument the original author made to his audience but in the language of today and in light of Christ.

This becomes your sermon's main argument, its big theme or idea. Once you've written your main argument in a brief sentence in today's language, flesh out the text's implications for both believers and unbelievers.

Once you've prepared, boldly preach the point of the text and apply it faithfully to your congregation. Because you're preaching the text in light of Christ, you won't preach a moralistic sermon. Instead, you'll preach Jesus Christ, our wisdom, the One who empowers his people to walk in the way of wisdom.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Estes, Daniel J., *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005).

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How Not to Preach the Gospels



Aubrey Sequeira

I grew up in a city that features the second longest beach in the world—the Marina Beach in Chennai. Marina Beach, one of the busiest in the world, is also one of the deadliest. Though the waters seem friendly and inviting, even experienced swimmers can quickly find themselves caught in a dangerous undertow, pulled out by rip tides, and buried in a watery grave.

Sounds ominous, but that’s an image I often think about when I’m trying to preach the Gospels. Wide-eyed preachers approach these books with a sense of familiarity and excitement, ready to unveil these portraits of Jesus for their congregations, and then unexpectedly find themselves tossed about and struggling, crying out “Someone, help me!”

The Gospels give us beautiful portraits of Jesus; they give us rich theology. But they come with their own set of hermeneutical and homiletical challenges—challenges we must know how

to navigate to faithfully proclaim Christ. Here are five “no swim zones” to avoid, five ways *not* to preach the Gospels:

1. DON'T PREACH THE GOSPELS AS A SET OF ISOLATED "PERICOPES" WITHOUT REFERENCE TO THEIR LARGER STORY.

The Gospels include a number of events and discourses from Jesus' life, woven into a coherent literary whole with a theological purpose. Most evangelicals rightly avoid a historical-critical approach that sees the Gospels as a patchwork of unrelated stories with questionable historicity. But the ghosts of these historical critical approaches still haunt evangelical preachers when they preach individual units of text—*pericopes*, to use a word common in Gospel studies—with no reference to the literary flow and larger theological story of each Gospel.

The Gospels aren't an anthology of short stories each with their own moral. Rather, they're *theological narratives*. We must therefore help our hearers pay attention to the theological message of each writer and the particular emphases of each Gospel. In preaching them, we must show our hearers both how smaller literary units contribute to the whole, and how the whole affects the meaning of each individual story.

For instance, in Matthew's Gospel, the preacher must beware the temptation to preach the parable of the sower (Matt 13:1–23) merely as a call to hearers to be “good soil” that receives the Word rightly. Rather, this parable must be understood in its place in the plot of Matthew's Gospel. These parables explain why the kingdom of heaven that has arrived in Jesus' person and message is all but invisible and is rejected by many. The parable of the sower reminds us of the sovereignty of the sower in the already/not-yet dynamic of the kingdom. Though the seed of the Word will face circumstances that seek to destroy, choke out, or wither its advan-

ce, the sower will finally be vindicated, for this seed will ultimately bear fruit far beyond expectations.

2. DON'T PREACH THE GOSPELS WITHOUT SHOWING THEIR PLACE IN THE BIBLE'S LARGER STORY.

The Gospels are both coherent literary accounts, and the climax of God's grand story that began in Genesis, unfolds through the Old Testament, and culminates in Christ. Each Gospel presents Jesus the Messiah as the fulfillment of the Old Testament storyline in different ways:

- Matthew presents Jesus as the Son of David, the Son of Abraham, the one in whom the kingdom of heaven has arrived in fulfillment of the Scriptures.
- Mark shows us that Yahweh has made his promised return to save his people in the enigmatic person of the Son of Man (Dan. 7:13–14; Mark 14:61–62), who in a dramatic plot twist is also the Suffering Servant (Isa. 53:11–12; Mark 10:45).
- Luke portrays Jesus as the promised Redeemer of Israel and the nations, the One whose suffering and glory was anticipated by the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.
- John boldly yet allusively presents Jesus as the true Temple, the true manna from heaven, the true light of God's presence with his people, the true Shepherd of God's people, the true one in whom the Old Testament hope of resurrection is fulfilled, the true fruit-bearing vine that Israel failed to be, and above all the Great I AM who has come to dwell with his people.

Preachers must help people see, as Luther said, how the Old Testament is “the swaddling cloths and the manger in which

Christ lies,”¹² while also helping people see how Christ brings Scripture’s storyline to a climax and sheds new light on all that has gone before.¹³

3. DON’T PREACH THE GOSPELS BY SUBSTITUTING A HISTORY “BEHIND-THE-TEXT” FOR THE TEXT ITSELF.

Preachers committed to Scripture should steer clear of another error of critical methodologies: the urge to create a history “behind-the-text” and preach that history instead of preaching the text itself.

What do I mean by this? Historical-critical methodologies have long advocated re-creation of the “historical Jesus,” a supposed wise sage or political zealot (or someone else) who stands behind the highly embellished presentations of the Gospel authors. While evangelicals balk at such ideas, we find ourselves guilty of the same mistake, when, in the interest of apologetics or harmonization, we try to re-construct “what actually happened” and preach *that* narrative instead of preaching what each Gospel writer is telling us in inspired words. This particular ghost of historical-critical past seems to favor appearances during Christmas season and Passion Week when preachers make a mash of the infancy or passion narratives to recreate and preach their own version of Christ’s birth or death.

Of course, good preachers should employ a wise and judicious approach to harmonization both for apologetic purposes (to help our hearers see that the Gospels complement rather than contradict one another) and for hearing the unique voice of each Gospel.

12 Martin Luther, “Preface to the Old Testament,” quoted in Richard B. Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 1.

13 Apart from good commentaries, preachers will be especially helped in this area by Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016); although the reader must be warned against Hays’ commitment to postmodern intertextual hermeneutics. Other helpful tools for preachers include G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

We must, however, resist the urge to preach our own speculative reconstructions with the same authority as the authority of the inspired text itself.

4. DON'T PREACH THE GOSPELS AS IF THE RED LETTERS ARE MORE INSPIRED OR IMPORTANT THAN THE REST OF SCRIPTURE.

This point ought to be taken for granted among evangelicals, but the false dichotomy between Jesus' words and the rest of Scripture is like the unclean spirit that keeps returning to possess churches that have once been exorcised of its influence. For example, it's becoming increasingly common today, even in evangelical circles, to claim that Jesus "never condemned homosexuality"—or that Jesus advocates a brand of "social justice" that's different from Paul or other parts of Scripture. When preaching the Gospels, we must be careful not to claim that the Gospels somehow reveal Jesus to us in a way that the rest of the Bible does not, for all of Scripture reveals Christ and him crucified.

Moreover, all of Scripture is the Spirit-inspired product of the Son's redemptive work: *all the words of Scripture are the words of Christ*, not just the red-letters (John 14:26; 16:13–15). *All of Scripture is God-breathed and is the Word of God* (2 Tim 3:16).

In preaching, therefore, we should avoid any kind of verbiage or emphasis that indicates otherwise. Beware the deadly undertow of setting the "red-letters" or "words of Christ" or the Gospels themselves over against the rest of the Old or New Testament!

5. DON'T PREACH THE GOSPELS WITHOUT PREACHING THE GOSPEL.

The Gospels have been famously described as "passion narratives with extended introductions," and rightly so.¹⁴ The shadow of the

¹⁴ M. Kähler, paraphrased by Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey* 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 129.

cross looms large in all four Gospels. As Don Carson says, “In each case the narrative rushes toward the cross and resurrection; the cross and resurrection are the climax.”¹⁵ It’s tempting, for instance, to preach Matthew’s temptation narrative (Matt. 4:1–11) as revealing the example of Jesus overcoming temptation through applying God’s Word. And in one sense, it does. We fail as preachers, however, if we do not also preach this narrative as demonstrating Jesus’ identity as the true and greater Israel and the true and greater Adam, overcoming temptation where all who have gone before him have failed.

Jesus continues living in perfect obedience till once again he hears the voice of his tempter saying “if you are the Son of God,” questioning his divine identity and sonship. But this time, he’s not hungry in the wilderness; he’s now hanging naked on the Cross (Matt 27:40). And yet again, he again overcomes through obedience, thus saving his people from their sin and being granted all authority in heaven and on earth.

The Gospels are portraits of Jesus. But above all, they’re portraits of Christ crucified, the Savior of his people. From the manger to the empty tomb, therefore, our sermons ought to *bleed*, pointing our hearers to the crucified Messiah King who suffers and dies to redeem his people and rises again to reign over his inaugurated kingdom. The first preacher to herald the arrival of Jesus called him “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!” (John 1:29). Go and do likewise!

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15 D. A. Carson, “The SBJT Forum: What are the most common errors that people make when it comes to understanding and proclaiming the kingdom?” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12 (2008): 107.

How Not to Preach the Epistles



Bobby Scott

If you haven't read *Expositional Preaching* by David Helm, pause for a minute and order it. I wholeheartedly agree with Mark Dever's endorsement, "If I were teaching a preaching class and could assign the students only one book, this might be the one." And guess what? The book is about 100 pages and no bigger than your hand! I like quick and insightful reads. Here's how Helm defines expository preaching.

It is empowered preaching that rightfully submits the shape and emphasis of the sermon to the shape and emphasis of a biblical text. In that way it brings out of the text what the Holy Spirit put there . . . and does not put into the text what the preacher thinks might be there.

My assignment is to explain how *not* to do that when preaching through epistles. Before I begin, let me confess that some of what I will share will be from my own personal failures as a

preacher, and if you're a preacher I'm sure some of what I write will expose some of yours. It's really easy to deceive ourselves into thinking we are faithfully preaching the Word when we actually are preaching our own thoughts.

If you're not a preacher, I encourage you to read carefully. Why? Because it's really easy to think that we've heard a profound sermon, when in fact we've just heard someone butcher a text and read in and out of it things God never put into the text. Every believer needs to carefully consider how to listen to sermons to make sure the preacher preaches what the Word of God actually teaches. If the Word of God commends the Bereans for checking against Scripture what Paul preached, then it would be wise of you to examine carefully the sermons that are preached to you (Acts 17:10–11).

So, here are a few ways epistles should *not* be expounded.

1. DON'T SKIP READING THE TEXT.

How many times have you expositionally preached through an epistle and decided that you didn't have time to actually read the text you're preaching? Remember that the Bible, and not your sermon, is the Word of God. Paul exhorted Timothy "Until I come, give your attention to the public reading, exhortation, and teaching" (of Scripture), 1 Timothy 4:13 (CSB). Notice, Paul doesn't say give attention *only* to your exhortation and teaching, but first he commands, "Give your attention to the public reading!"

It is the Word of God, not our thoughts about the Word of God, that God uses to transform believers from one level of glory to the next (2 Cor. 3:18). So preachers of the Word of God, make time in your sermons to read the Word. If you don't have time, feel free to cut out jokes, anecdotal stories, and sports illustrations. Your folks probably don't think you're that funny anyway, and if they follow sports they've heard better insights than yours. And if

you're listening to someone preach through a text and they don't read it, make sure that you do. The Bible is God's breathed-out Word, your pastor's sermon isn't.

2. DON'T TAKE TEN YEARS TO PREACH THROUGH EACH LETTER.

Now I know I'm treading on sacred ground. So let me try to explain. There's no sin in *s l o w l y* preaching through each letter of the Bible. Some of the church's greatest expositors moved through the New Testament at a tortoise's pace. Nevertheless, I appeal to letters of the New Testament really are just that—*letters*—and the original recipients would have heard them read and explained in a single sitting. While it's certainly true that original readers shared common cultures and history with the authors, I still contend that letters can be meaningfully understood when preached over shorter periods of time.

Otherwise, what does Paul mean when he affirms the clarity of Scripture in 2 Corinthians 1:13, “For we are writing nothing to you other than what you can read and also understand. I hope you will understand completely” (CSB17). My pastoral concern is this: unless God grants you greater longevity than Abraham, if you take years and years to preach through each epistle, then how will God's sheep experience that “*all Scripture* is profitable for teaching”? Our people need to hear and learn the full counsel of God. So if you're hardwired to exposit very, very, *very* slowly through the Bible, then at least provide survey classes where your people can have an opportunity to hear the entire Bible taught.

As important as it is to carefully explain and apply an epistle like Romans, God's people need to hear the man of God preach *all* of the epistles and *all* of the Scriptures and to apply *all* of God's Word to their souls because *all* Scripture is profitable.

3. DON'T MAKE IT YOUR GOAL TO BE RELEVANT.

Why should you preach what apostles and prophets, who lived thousands of years ago, wrote to their pre-modern, pre-scientific, agrarian audiences? After all, times have changed. You know your people. You know their situations, their problems, and their needs. So every Sunday preach to them what *you think* they need to hear.

That style of *preaching* is so common today. But what did Jesus say? He said, “The one who speaks on his own seeks his own glory” (John 7:18).

There is a deep morality to preaching. God revealed his inerrant truth in the Scriptures and gave the twofold means to receive it (1) through humble dependence upon the Spirit (1 Cor 2), and (2) through the hard labor of precise exegesis (2 Tim 2:15). Pride and self-reliance will keep preachers blind and deaf to God’s truth and will foolishly embolden them to replace God’s infallible words with their own.

Think of the crime of replacing God thoughts with ours and then binding people’s conscience to them as if they are God’s. Therefore, let every faithful preacher surrender the entire preaching process from exegesis to exposition to the authority of God. Every preacher must commit to preaching what the text actually says and how the text says what it says. Why? Because every word, every sentence, every paragraph, every chapter, and every book is God-breathed. Because the entire Bible, including every epistle, is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16).

So preachers strengthened by the Holy Spirit must bear the weight of the responsibility of preaching God’s Word—not his pet peeves, not his hobby horses, not his worldly insights. The Word of God is living, and therefore it will never become antiqued or replaceable with the wisdom of any philosophy or any preacher.

4. DON'T SKIP STUDYING THE TEXT.

Preaching with what Spurgeon would call “unction” in no way means preaching without studying. The Word of God demands of preachers that we labor at studying the text so that, like a tent-maker, we cut it precisely along its true lines (2 Tim 2:15). Every effort must be taken to make sure that what the preacher says, God has indeed said, and that result can only be achieved through diligent labor.

For instance, if you opened up a magazine and saw the words “He killed her,” how would you interpret it? A man murdered a woman, and there is a dead body somewhere. But what if you read that line in a sports magazine, or as a part of a political commentary, or in the entertainment section describing a movie? There in fact would not be a dead person or an actual murderer. Preaching what the text says requires reading precisely, and reading precisely means reading in context.

Epistles are letters to Christians, not systematic theologies. They have a historical context, a specific occasion. Chloe’s people sent Paul a letter with a list of problems (1 Cor. 1:10–11) and questions, and 1 Corinthians is God’s answer to those problems and questions (1 Cor. 7:25; 8:1; 11:17; 12:1; 16:1 etc.). The meaning in biblical letters therefore can be discerned by reading along through paragraphs, discerning the theme of those paragraphs, and connecting those themes to the historical context of why the letter was written.

Furthermore, authors convey meaning by the words they choose and how they arrange them. Consider the following statements: “My neighbor is quiet.” “Is my neighbor quiet?” “Neighbor, be quiet!” Each of those clauses uses the same words, but have different meanings because I changed the word order and relationship and function of the words. The faithful expositor needs to carefully follow the syntax of the text in the proper context

in order to discern the authorial intent of the text. They need to investigate the relationship between words, phrases, and clauses. This takes work! But when done faithfully, Paul again offers the encouragement that through careful reading the reader can gain an accurate and clear understanding of the Word of God (2 Cor. 1:13).

Those who draw the meaning out of the text and preach what the text says will be blessed. Those who instead preach what they think the congregation wants to hear (2 Tim 4:1–4) will fail. So study and preach the Word. God ordained it as a means for your salvation and for the salvation of those who hear you (1 Tim 4:16).

5. DON'T SKIP PRAYER.

Why pray when preaching is an intellectual exercise of reading and interpreting a text and then communicating what you've read? If you can read and interpret, you should be able to preach. So why pray?

We should pray as we preach because there's no weightier job on earth, and no one is adequate to do it without God's help (2 Cor. 2:15–17).

If anything ought to make a man pray it's to be a sinner standing before other sinners with the charge to proclaim, "Thus says the Lord." It's one thing to have the duty as an ambassador to represent a nation; it's altogether another responsibility to represent the Sovereign of the Universe. Men misquote men all the time; men libel and slander one another. But the Bible explicitly warns that few of us should be teachers of God's Word for we will incur a stricter judgment (James 3:1).

Preacher, for your soul's sake and for the sake of those to whom you preach, let the Word of God compel you to pray before, during, and after you preach. I'm reminded of a quote I heard attributed to Spurgeon that someone heard him muttering as he as-

sailed his pulpit, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, I believe in the Holy Spirit.” Brothers, without the help of the Holy Spirit there will be no conviction of sin when you preach; there will be no repentance, no victories, no growing in grace, no Christ-like transformations. All these are the work that God brings about through the preaching of his Word to his people by the working of the Spirit.

But be encouraged, brothers. If God has called you to preach, and if you do preach his Word depending on his Spirit, then no power in hell can hinder the outcome. God saves, God sanctifies, God encourages, God builds his church through the preaching of his Word. Be faithful, be humble, be diligent, and remain dependent. Let God, whose words brought the universe into existence, use you to herald the truth from his letters to the sheep he has called you to shepherd.

And if you're not a preacher, let me remind you: faithful exposition exposes the precise meaning of the text. If you can consistently close your Bible during the Sunday sermons, if you consistently hear only stories and contemporary analogies, then lovingly encourage your pastor to preach the Word (1 Tim 4:1–2). If he or they refuse, then find a healthy church that does.

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Bad Biblical Theology Leads to Bad Sermons



Sam Emadi

Much modern evangelical biblical theology is a gift to the church. It has successfully stemmed the tide of moralistic preaching in many churches and has provided useful theological resources to combat the most egregious theological dangers of our day, such as the prosperity gospel.

But I've also witnessed—and been guilty of—some bad biblical theology. Over time, this bad biblical theology will undercut a congregation's health—warping the message of Scripture and stunting a church's growth in the knowledge of God.

All of us—not just preachers—should beware of bad biblical theology. But what exactly does bad biblical theology look like?

1. BAD BIBLICAL THEOLOGY LEADS TO “CHRIST-CENTERED” SERMONS THAT NEVER MAKE MORAL DEMANDS OF THE CONGREGATION.

The Bible is opposed to moralism, not morality. Regrettably, I've heard many sermons which confuse the two. I've even

interacted with some preachers and seminary students who would wince a little if they heard a preacher rattle off commands to his congregation in the way Paul does in the epistles (cf. 1 Cor. 16:13–14).

I appreciate the desire on the part of many pastors to avoid “moralism” and to emphasize the gospel as the agent of transformation in the Christian life. Yet it’s also the case that some preachers—particularly younger ones—need to embrace that preaching must also include appropriate exhortations for the congregation to *respond* to Christ’s climactic fulfillment of the Old Testament. The law “used lawfully” in gospel preaching (1 Tim. 1:8) is both biblical and necessary.

For example, preaching how Jesus fulfills the Davidic Covenant and ascends the throne of Israel demands that we call people to bow their knee to Jesus the king. Preaching how Jesus fulfills the office of priest demands that we call people to trust in his sacrifice. Preaching Jesus as the prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15a) demands that we also tell people “to him you shall listen” (Deut. 18:15b). Preaching Jesus as the fulfillment of the temple demands that we also teach people that Christ has poured the Spirit out on his church and expects us to preserve the purity of God’s dwelling through faithful discipleship and discipline. Preaching Jesus as the fulfillment of the law demands that we also tell people “don’t worship idols, honor your father and mother, don’t look at porn, don’t steal, don’t lie, don’t covet.”

Additionally, preaching how Jesus fulfills Old Testament types must include how the Messiah incorporates his people into that fulfillment. I’ve left many sermons, which masterfully demonstrated how Jesus fulfilled some Old Testament type, thinking, “Wow, isn’t Jesus amazing! I sure wish he had something to do with me!” It’s exhilarating to discover how every story in the Old Testament whispers Jesus’ name—how every promise, person, and pattern is ultimately fulfilled in him.

At the same time, we must remember that we are also a part of the story. Jesus is the true and better temple, but he gives his people that same identity (1 Cor. 3:16). Jesus is the true and better Israel, but he incorporates those who put faith in him into the new Israelite community (Gal. 6:16). Jesus rises from the dead, fulfilling types of resurrection in the OT (1 Cor. 15:1–3), but his resurrection is a first fruit of what’s to come, guaranteeing our coming resurrection and offering a hope that should shape our everyday lives (1 Cor. 15:58). Christ-centered preaching is unavoidably ecclesiological—he is the head, we are the body.

I commend preachers who don’t want to sully their congregation’s estimation of God’s grace revealed in the cross and resurrection of Christ. Having experienced moralistic preaching, I know first-hand the spiritual crises it creates. But avoiding imperatives altogether is shortsighted and misguided. I’m confident the cripple in Mark 2 didn’t lose any sense of the wonder of grace or reliance on Christ when the Lord commanded him to pick up his mat and go home.

2. BAD BIBLICAL THEOLOGY LEADS TO SERMONS THAT AVOID PRESENTING BIBLICAL CHARACTERS AS POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE MORAL EXAMPLES.

Perhaps you’ve heard youth pastors challenge you to “dare to be a Daniel” or “flee sexual temptation like Joseph.” Perhaps you’ve sat under preaching that encouraged you to “be like” Abraham, David, Jonathan, Josiah, Paul, or even Jesus. In my first year of seminary, I scoffed at such “moralism.” After a few years, I stopped the scoffing. Yes, we must preach Jesus from every text authentically by reading each passage in light of the entire canon of Scripture and the climax of redemptive-history in Christ. And yes, the characters of Scripture ultimately point beyond themselves to the grace of God in his Son. But the New Testament authors, in the context of a robust, Christ-centered

biblical theology, do not shy away from presenting Old Testament characters as moral exemplars.

Jesus and the Apostles routinely call Christians to “be like” or “not be like” Old Testament figures (cf. Heb. 12:16). Even Paul tells us that Israel’s sinful actions in the wilderness “took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did” (1 Cor. 10:6; cf. 10:11). Likewise, James encourages believers to be like the prophets, Job, and Elijah (Jas. 5:10–18). Paul even commends *himself* as someone the Corinthians ought to imitate (1 Cor. 11:1). Furthermore, many of Jesus’ parables command listeners to imitate exemplary characters (Matt. 7:24–27). After teaching on the Good Samaritan, Jesus commanded the lawyer, “go and do likewise” (Lk 10:37). In other words, “go and *be like* the good Samaritan.”

Of course, preaching that *only* employs biblical characters as moral exemplars is unbiblical. But preaching that fails to draw any moral implications from the lives of biblical characters is equally unbiblical. We must show how each story finds its climax in God’s final word in Christ, *and* we must draw out moral lessons from the lives of biblical characters.

To be sure, preaching should primarily aim at transforming the heart, but transformed hearts still need to be taught to observe all that Jesus commanded (Matt. 28:20). Moral exemplars are one of the most powerful ways to inspire obedience among God’s people. Who can’t help but feel a little steel in their spine when reading about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego standing tall in the throng of kneeling idolaters (Dan 3)? As theologian Bruce Wayne said in *Batman Begins*, “people need dramatic examples to shake them out of apathy.”

3. BAD BIBLICAL THEOLOGY LEADS TO SERMONS THAT SOUND THE SAME EVERY WEEK.

Some redemptive-historical preaching can fall into the trap of sa-

ying the same thing week after week. Rather than allowing the contours of the text to shape the homiletical outline, some preachers allow their biblical-theological commitments to dictate the structure of their sermon, and so the point of each sermon always tends to be the same: “look how Jesus fulfilled X from the Old Testament.” As Derek Thomas has noted, a redemptive-historical sermon can be “breathtaking” the first time you encounter it, but if it’s the only tool in your tool-belt, your sermons will soon become predictable. Again, as Thomas notes, redemptive-historical preaching can often be characterized as having a “hermeneutic of sameness.”¹⁶[1]

4. BAD BIBLICAL THEOLOGY LEADS TO SERMONS THAT FOCUS SO INTENTLY ON THE “BIG PICTURE,” THEY AVOID EXEGESIS AND ENGAGING THE DETAILS OF THE TEXT.

A final problem with some redemptive-historical preaching is the way it fails to unpack the actual text being preached. Rather than letting exegesis drive the sermon, I’ve heard many preachers simply identify the big biblical-theological theme (temple, priest, king, law, Sabbath, etc.) and then walk through Scripture’s meta-narrative focusing on that theme. Unfortunately, this approach ignores the most basic preaching question: “what does *the text* say?” Ultimately, our biblical-theological route to Jesus must emerge from exegesis of the text.

CONCLUSION

Evangelical preaching has benefitted from the lectures, articles, and books reinvigorating the notion that every sermon ultimately must lead its hearers to respond to God’s free grace in the gospel. But no adjective fits better with preaching than “expository.”

¹⁶ Derek Thomas, “Expository Preaching” in *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2008), 42.

Why? Because faithful sermons *exposit* the text, and faithful exposition takes into account the text's literary, historical, covenantal, and ultimately canonical context.

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Preaching Without Exemplars



Jason Hood

Twenty years ago I was driving with a friend when he asked me a Bible trivia question that shook my theological paradigms: “What does Paul explicitly say that he teaches ‘everywhere in every church’?” I didn’t know the answer. I knew that “first importance” topics certainly would have been taught by Paul “everywhere in every church”: Jesus’ death for sinners according to the Scriptures, his resurrection from the dead, and his status as Davidic king (1 Cor. 15:3–4; 2 Tim. 2:8; Rom. 1:3–4). On the basis of 1 Corinthians 2:2, I thought that “the cross of Christ” might be the answer.

But none of these answers were correct.

“IMITATE ME AS I IMITATE CHRIST”

Instead, we find the answer in 1 Corinthians 4:8–17. In that passage Paul reminds the Corinthians that he teaches his “ways in Christ

. . . everywhere in every church.” This passage carries enormous import for our preaching, teaching, and pastoring. It reflects Paul’s consistent pattern of holding out his own dramatic résumé as a model for others (2 Cor. 4:7–10; 11:21–12:10). “Imitate me as I imitate Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1) is the mic-drop moment in the lengthy idol meat discussion (1 Cor. 8:1–11:1). This call to imitate is the summation of Paul’s ethical reasoning. We can let go of what is rightfully ours for the sake of others, just as Jesus did, just as Paul did.

Paul regularly offers himself and Jesus as countercultural blueprints for congregations tempted to construct their lives according to the pattern of the world. Paul crucifies his comfort; they must crucify sin. God in Christ welcomed you; they can welcome other brothers and sisters across ethnic or theological lines. Paul takes on the yoke of travel, prison, diligent prayer, and angst for his congregations; his congregations must suffer through the hard work of spiritual discipline.

Paul also holds out others as examples. Paul is sending them Timothy, his “faithful son.” Translated from ancient discipleship language, this nomenclature means that he is a true copy of his teacher. He will not only teach Paul’s ways; he can live them. Later in the Corinthian correspondence he holds up the generosity of the Macedonians as an example for them (2 Cor. 8:1–5). He wants the Philippians to imitate others who walk as Paul walks, not claiming their own righteousness but looking to the Messiah. The Thessalonians are commended as “imitators of us and of the Lord,” and they have become models for other believers (1 Thess. 1:6–7).

WRONG WAYS TO THINK ABOUT IMITATION

My friend’s pop quiz triggered my inner Berean and spurred me to revisit the Scriptures in the years that followed to explore the role imitation plays in Christian discipleship and proclamation. I’ve often asked Robby’s question of my students, and they’ve had

no more success than I. “Stump the seminarian” might seem like a rather banal game to play, but thankfully my students often had their curiosity stoked like mine. As I’ve asked them this question over the years, even those steeped in the Scriptures don’t know the answer, in part because imitation has been downplayed or altogether ignored by conservative expositors who recoil at its misuse.

Indeed, many people view Jesus and other biblical characters merely as examples. As a young Christian, I attended a liberal arts college where Jesus was, at most, an exemplar of love and tolerance. I recently had the privilege of getting to know a pastor who has worked in his city for more than two decades. This brother has toiled in counsel, preaching, evangelism, and discipleship for many decades. But as we discussed his typical preaching strategies, it became clear that we have very different strategies for our sermons, and that his need to deliver practical instruction dominates his approach to proclamation. Under such pressure, “Jesus as a model” can squeeze “Jesus as Savior” to the margins.

On the other hand, in response to such approaches I sometimes hear pastors downplay or even denigrate imitation. One popular pastor formerly in my denomination argued that “Jesus and Jesus alone is the Good Samaritan,” and we are not given the parable to imitate the character or be instructed in behavior that Jesus wants. There’s at least one problem with this: Jesus disagrees (Luke 10:37). Surely if Paul, the apostle of grace, thinks this highly of imitation, our preaching and teaching are sub-Pauline if imitation is not a prominent feature. The solution is not to jettison imitation but to look again at Scripture, letting Scripture’s own interpretation guide our proclamation.

GUARDRAILS FOR PREACHING IMITATION

As we look to Scripture, we can discern a few hermeneutical handrails.

First, a theology of imitation should begin not with Jesus and other characters but with the imitation of God, who made humans to look like him.

The imitation of God's holiness and care bridges the ethics of the Old and New Testaments (Lev. 11, Matt. 5:48; 1 Pet. 1:16; 1 Jn. 2:29; 3:3). If we anchor the imitation of Jesus and other biblical characters in the imitation of Israel's God, we're better positioned to move beyond the dead-end of merely being nice like a liberal Jesus, or taking an overly literal, rote approach to imitation. We can and should emphasize the beautiful "loving-kindness" (*chesed*) of Ruth and Boaz as characters worthy of imitation, but not without pointing to the God whose "loving-kindness (*chesed*) they were imitating.

Just as God designed humanity to be like him, he saves humanity for the same end. As Calvin writes, "The goal of our regeneration is that we may be like God, and that his glory may shine forth in us" (Calvin Commentaries Col. 3:9–10).

Secondly, many uses of imitation in Scripture are less than explicit.

Because the mimetic purpose of literature is no longer as obvious as it was in previous generations, faithful expositors must help their audiences draw appropriate inferences from the text. Paul's frequent autobiographical comments are intended to have mimetic impact. The four references to his suffering and imprisonment in Ephesians, for instance, seem to say: "I'm in prison, and you likewise should be willing to sacrifice for the sake of the gospel." Matthew's Gospel repeatedly shows Jesus modeling obedience to his own commands, but the distance between the commands and his obedience means that such connections won't be clear unless interpreters link them.

Third, imitation must be properly defined.

At a popular level, imitation is sometimes understood as rote copying: wearing sandals, growing a beard, having twelve disci-

ples. Perhaps this is why imitation often falls by the wayside. We fail to see Phineas as a zealous believer to imitate because we know that we cannot run anyone through with a spear (Num. 25:6–11; cf Ps. 106:29–31). But when we define imitation as the replication of patterns and directions rather than precise duplication, zeal for purity and holiness can be imitated even if our weapons are spiritual rather than physical (Rom. 12:8; Rev. 3:19). As Kevin Vanhoozer surmises, “*Mimēsis* is not about making exact copies. Jesus’ person and work are singular, unique, and thus unrepeatable. The Christian vocation is rather that of *creative imitation*, a nonidentical participation in the missions of the Son and Spirit” (*The Drama of Doctrine*, 401, emphasis his).

In the spirit of creative imitation, Mark famously records three passion predictions. What is rarely recognized by interpreters is that the paragraph or pericope following each of those predictions sheds light on the cross-shaped path of Christian discipleship:

Jesus’ cross and sacrifice: 8:31–33; 9:30–32; 10:32–34

Disciples’ cross-shaped response:
8:34–38; 9:32–35; 10:35–45

For the Gospel writers, imitation is not about Peter walking on water in imitation of Jesus so much as living after the pattern of Jesus’s life of trust, obedience, and sacrificial love. Augustine came to a similar conclusion: “What is walking as Jesus walked? Walking upon the sea? No, it is walking in the way of righteousness . . . the way of charity.” (Augustine, *First Homily on I John*).

ANSWERING OBJECTIONS

An objection sometimes raised is that the biblical characters are a mix of good and bad and are therefore not really heroes. But fai-

lure and ambiguity don't prevent characters from functioning as examples. Abraham was a profound sinner, but he still illustrates faith that justifies (Rom. 4), inherits and sojourns (Heb. 11), and works (Jas. 2). The books of 1 and 2 Kings focus on the errors that lead to the exile, while 1 and 2 Chronicles acknowledge sin and judgment but place the accent on the success of God's people in worship, repentance, and prayer. The same character can be both a model to follow *and* an example of what befalls us in unbelief and disobedience. Don't be like Manasseh (2 Kgs. 21:1–18). Be like Manasseh (2 Chron. 33:1–20).

Another common objection is that emphasizing imitation obscures the gospel. To be sure, we don't want to become legalists who major on instruction and minor on grace. But to the extent our congregations are regenerate, we're not speaking to those who have no power to trust, love, and obey God. Moreover, finding Jesus or the gospel in an Old Testament text makes it *more* likely to be used for imitation, not less. Second Timothy 3:15–16 and 1 Corinthians 10:1–11 illustrate the way in which gospel-centered interpretation facilitates moral interpretation and imitation rather than eliminating it. Luther wisely lays out the right course of action in *A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels* (1521):

The chief article and foundation of the Gospel is that before you take Christ as an example, you accept and recognize him as a gift, as a present that God has given you. . . . Now when you have Christ as the foundation and chief blessing of your salvation, then the other part follows: that you take him as your example, giving yourself in service to your neighbor just as you see that Christ has given himself for you. See, there faith and love move forward, God's commandment is fulfilled, and a person is happy and fearless to do and to suffer all things.

Luther rightly believes that imitation flows from the gospel; it doesn't compete with it. In Exodus, God compels Israel to reflect

his loving-kindness and holiness only after he has first shown them his own loving-kindness by saving them from Egypt. The Bible keeps a right order to the relationship between gospel and imitation, and so must we.

IMITATION AND PREACHING

For preachers, the imitation of Jesus has value not merely for our interpretation but also for our sanctification and ministry. Consider the words of John Stott

The place of suffering in service and of passion in mission is hardly ever taught today. But the greatest single secret of evangelistic or missionary effectiveness is the willingness to suffer and die. It may be a death to popularity (by faithfully preaching the unpopular biblical gospel), or to pride (by the use of modest methods in reliance on the Holy Spirit), or to racial or national prejudice (by identification with another culture), or to material comfort (by adopting a simple lifestyle). But the servant must suffer if he is to bring light to the nations, and the seed must die if it is to multiply. (*The Cross of Christ* [20th Anniversary ed.; IVP, 2006], 313)

Ministry in the 21st century no less than the first century will require suffering and sacrifice.

Imitation should frequently garnish the homiletical plates we set before our congregations. Virtually every biblical book deploys Jesus or other characters as examples. Even tiny 3 John and Jude use positive and negative examples (3 John 11, Jude 7–10). God inspired his Word so that every nook and cranny would be useful for moral instruction: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” We should use Scripture accordingly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Allegorical Interpretation: Finding the Line Before You Cross It



Robert Kinney

Have you heard Augustine's take on the parable of the Good Samaritan? It might leave you a little confused.

In Augustine's rendering, there is a man (Adam) traveling a road. Having been stripped (of immortality) and beaten (or persuaded to sin) by robbers (the devil), he is ignored by a priest (the Law) and a Levite (the Prophets) before being attended to by a Samaritan (Jesus Christ). The Samaritan takes him to the inn (or the Church) where two denarii (the promises of this life and the life to come) are paid to the innkeeper (the Apostle Paul), to take care of the man.¹⁷

¹⁷ Augustine, Enarationes in Psalmos 118, 121 and 125, De Doctrina Christiana 1.30.31ff, Sermo 299.

It's an intriguing example of *allegorical interpretation*. Yet for those committed to biblical exposition, this kind of interpretation is deeply problematic.¹⁸ Expository preaching should be constrained by the author's intent—and neither Jesus in his telling nor Luke in his recording could have meant much of what Augustine suggests.¹⁹

But on the other hand, in our age of right commitments to Christ-centered preaching and a right understanding that all the Scriptures do point to the gospel of Jesus Christ, it's easy to be sympathetic to Augustine's goal.²⁰ The gospel should be preached! And indeed, the human mind was designed to appreciate the beauty of intricate literary connections and be excited by the fulfillment of such patterns. This makes allegorizing the Bible in a sermon not only tempting, but satisfying.

Yet, again, allegory is something less than exposition. It's difficult to know where to draw the line. How far is too far?

One of the most significant challenges to considering *allegory* is a problem of definitions.

18 Without naming Augustine, John Calvin responds to this kind of interpretation in characteristically blunt fashion: "The allegory which is here contrived by the advocates of free will is too absurd to deserve refutation... I acknowledge that I have no liking for any of these interpretations; but we ought to have a deeper reverence for Scripture than to reckon ourselves at liberty to disguise its natural meaning. And, indeed, any one may see that the curiosity of certain men has led them to contrive these speculations, contrary to the intention of Christ." See Calvin's commentary on Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-37 in John Calvin, *The Harmony of the Gospels*, Vol. 3 (trans. W. Pringle and J. King; Altenmünster: Jazzybee, 2012), 49. While Calvin's comments indicate that he is strongly opposed to this kind of allegorical interpretation, he ironically engages in it with a striking frequency. For example, in his commentary on Exodus 28:2, he notes that the garments made for Aaron and his sons are meant to 'conceal their faults' and, instead, display virtue and, indeed, the 'wondrous glory of Christ.' The text, in Exod 28:2, simply states the garments are to be made "for glory and for beauty." See Calvin's commentary on Exodus 28:2 in John Calvin, *The Harmony of the Law*, Vol. 2 (trans. J. King; Altenmünster: Jazzybee, 2012), 103.

19 Mark Dever defines expository preaching as "preaching that takes for the point of a sermon the point of a particular passage of Scripture." Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, Third Edition (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 44. David R. Helm defines it similarly as "empowered preaching that rightfully submits the shape and emphasis of the sermon to the shape and emphasis of a biblical text." David R. Helm, *Expository Preaching: How We Speak God's Word Today* (Wheaton, Crossway, 2014), 13. D.A. Carson defines it similarly as "the unpacking of what is there." He goes on to add: "it is unpacking what the biblical text or texts actually say. If we expect God to re-reveal himself by his own words, then our expositions must reflect as faithfully as possible what God actually said when the words were given to us in Scripture." D.A. Carson, "Challenges for the Twenty-first-century Pulpit" in *Preach the Word: Essays in Honor of R. Kent Hughes* (ed., L. Ryken, T. Wilson; Wheaton: Crossway: 2008), 176-177. Finally, Bryan Chapell offers this definition: "An expository sermon takes its topic, main points, and subpoints from a text.2 In an expository message, a preacher makes a commitment to explain what a particular text means by using the spiritual principles it supports as the points of the message." Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 131.

20 See Luke 24:13-49.

DEFINITIONS AND CHALLENGES

During antiquity and through the Middle Ages, *allegorical interpretation* was one of a few ways of reading Scripture (along with literal, moral, and anagogical interpretation). It focused primarily on drawing connections between Jesus Christ (or others) and the stories of the Old Testament. It's thought to have emerged because aspects of the Old Testament would be difficult to apply sensibly without seeing a fulfillment in the gospel.²¹ One major problem with the terminology from this period is that *allegory* is often used interchangeably with *parable* and *typology* and can refer to any sort of *metaphorical* or *analogical* correspondence. Even through the Reformation, these terms are broadly indistinguishable.

It's not until relatively recently that *typology* and *allegory* have come to mean different things. Presently, we use the word *typology* to refer to connections between an Old Testament concept, typically, and an escalated fulfillment in the gospel of Jesus Christ that is textually warranted (by some standard), while we use the term *allegory* to refer to more arbitrary connections that are not textually warranted (by some standard).²²

Dictionary definitions are not especially precise either. For example, *allegory* is:

A popular form of literature in which a story points to a hidden or symbolic parallel meaning. Certain elements, such as people, things, and happenings in the story, point to corresponding elements in another realm or level of meaning.²³

With such a broad definition—one that can encompass legitimate typologies and exegetically sound ways of reading as well as more fanciful reading—other nuances must be considered.

21 See Origen, *On First Principles*, 4.2.

22 See Aubrey Spears, "Preaching the Old Testament," in *Hearing the Old Testament: Listening for God's Address* (ed., C.G. Bartholomew, D.J.H. Beldman; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 383-409.

23 Philip Barton Payne, "Allegory" in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. W.A. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 14. By contrast, Beale defines typology as "the study of analogical correspondences among revealed truths about persons, events, institutions, and other things within the historical framework of God's special revelation, which from a retrospective view, are of a prophetic nature and are escalated in their meaning." See G.K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 14.

PASSAGE VERSUS PREACHER

Perhaps the most important distinction is that of who is driving the connection between passages. Is there something in the text that indicates a legitimate connection? Or is the connection originating entirely from the mind of the preacher? This is the most important distinction to make and it provides us with a substantive criterion for distinguishing between typology and allegory.²⁴

If a passage anticipates a future fulfillment (whether in the immediate literary and historical context or an ultimate fulfillment in the Messiah, for example), it's essential to trace *how* the passage is ultimately fulfilled. The single best way to do this is to see how a subsequent passage (usually in the New Testament) refers back to your passage.²⁵ If textual connections cannot be drawn, then we have to consider that the source could be the preacher and not the passage.

For example, consider the demise of Saul in 1 Samuel 28:20–25. Having been confronted by the ghost of Samuel, Saul devolves into “obeying the voice” of the medium of Endor. He consumes a somber meal prepared by her. It's one of the darkest moments in the life of a very troubled man, not least of which because he had just been told he will die the next day.

To be sure, there are some interesting connections with the Lord's Supper here: one identified as an anointed one, consuming a quasi-ceremonial meal the night before dying, and in particular the partaking of unleavened bread. But is there anything in the text that suggests a greater fulfillment to come? Is there anything in any of the New Testament passages describing the Lord's Supper that

24 The Bible gives us warrant for making a connection between an Old Testament passage and a fulfillment in Christ, of course. For example, John the Baptist calls Jesus ‘the lamb of God’ in John 1:29. That the Passover lamb is a type. An even clearer example of this is Romans 5:12–21, in which Adam is called a “type of the one who was to come,” using the word type (τυπος).

25 Particularly useful here is David R. Helm's advice on finding such connections: “A great shortcut that I use almost every week is an index that comes with the Nestle-Aland 28th Edition. Even if you don't read Greek, this index is helpful because it lists every allusion and citation of the Old Testament in the New Testament.” David Helm, *Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God's Word Today* (Wheaton, Crossway, 2014), 71.

point us back to this passage in 1 Samuel 28? If we can answer these questions, we'll see who's driving the connection. Is the author giving us a textual reason to connect these two meals? Or are we, as readers, making the connection completely on our own?

In making such connections, we run the risk of de-historicizing the original passage—or depriving it of its historical context and legitimacy as foundational fact.²⁶ We title the sermon something clever like “Saul’s Last Supper,” suggesting that this passage anticipates an ultimate fulfillment in Christ’s final meal—though by way of contrast as Saul dies for his own sins and Christ dies on behalf of his people. In so doing, we might also skip textual steps and then lose the point of the author in the passage, which is darkly reflecting on the ultimate demise of Israel’s first king.

In this case, the connections the author of 1 Samuel makes seem not to be to the Lord’s Supper, but the Passover meal. The specter of dying sons (1 Sam 28:19), the slaughter of a young animal (1 Sam 28:24) and the baking of unleavened bread (also 1 Sam 28:24) are all suggestive details. In doing the hard work of uncovering a biblical theological theme of that meal, we can then legitimately connect to the Passover meal celebrated by our Lord.

In short, the question we have to be able to clearly answer is whether the connections are coming from the passage, in which case we can responsibly practice biblical theology, or from our own minds—however theologically reasonable, in which case we should be cautious.

INTERPRETATION VS. ILLUSTRATION

If we are convinced of a connection—though possibly allegorical—one other distinction should come into play. It’s a distinction of presentation. When making the connection, do we present it

²⁶ David R. Helm addresses this concern of dehistoricizing texts in his chapter on Theological Reflection in David Helm, *Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God’s Word Today* (Wheaton, Crossway, 2014), 61-86.

as an intention of the author? Or are we using the connection illustratively?

If a legitimate textual connection can't be made, we can still make a gospel connection. That is, don't present a gospel connection as an interpretation, but as an illustration. Illustrations, of course, are not only endearing stories about pets or the harrowing tales of hiking with the wrong boots. They're not only historical biography or clever stories that begin the sermon and, somehow, always seem to find their punch line in the conclusion of the sermon. We can also use the Bible to illustrate the Bible.

For example, Isaiah 43:1–7 teaches that God does not abandon his children. Hezekiah had messed up pretty badly a few chapters earlier by welcoming an envoy from Babylon. Yet God promises in these opening verses of Isaiah 43 to be with his children through the consequences of their sin (Babylonian exile). In fact, God uses remarkably intimate language to articulate his love for his people and his commitment to bring them home. This passage does not connect textually to the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11–32, obviously. Yet that story of a lost son who is loved and welcomed back by his father, having experienced something of an exile, can provide a remarkably affective illustration. As long as the parable is presented as such, and not as an intertextual interpretation of Isaiah 43 or an ultimate fulfillment, it can be used to preach the gospel with elegance.

In short, we need to be clear and precise in our communication. We must not present something as an interpretation that isn't intended by the author. But at the same time, we should not be afraid to make connections as illustrations.

MOVING FORWARD

Even after considering both the source of a connection between a text and the gospel (passage or preacher?) as well as how we will

present it (as an interpretation or an illustration?), *allegorical interpretation* remains a problematic venture. It becomes license to mishandle the text of Scripture. What are we to do?

Here are a few suggestions:

1. Pray.
2. Do the hard work of exegesis, particularly finding the structure of the passage and seeing it in its literary and historical context. What is the author's intent? Are there theological connections that are legitimate?
3. Consider how other parts of the Bible (typically New Testament connections) handle the content of your text. Is there precedent for making this theological connection?
4. Work all the tools of biblical theology in your passage to see what legitimate textual connections can be made. Is there a theme, typology, trajectory, or other biblical-theological connection that can be made legitimately?
5. When in doubt, choose to illustrate rather than suggest an interpretation.

Allegorical interpretation is problematic. It can lead to preaching that dehistoricizes the Scriptures or plays fast and loose with God's Word. Yet the impulse behind it—the desire to preach the gospel from all the Scriptures—is a right one. Let's work hard and with careful nuance so that the good news may be proclaimed in all our preaching.

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What Would the Puritans Say to Us Now? Learning from Puritan Prescriptions on Preaching



Matthew D. Haste

What comes to your mind when you imagine a Puritan pastor in the pulpit? Long, boring sermons? Monotone diatribes? Such notions fail to account for the testimony of men like Humphrey Mills who spent three years struggling to quiet his conscience after hearing a sermon by the famous Puritan pastor, Richard Sibbes (1577–1635). Mills’ description of Sibbes provides a more accurate picture of Puritan preachers: “His sweet soul-melting Gospel-sermons won my heart and refreshed me much, for by him I saw and had much of God and was confident in Christ.”²⁷

²⁷ Referenced in Michael Reeves, foreword to *The Tender Heart*, by Richard Sibbes, Pocket Puritans (1983; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2011), ix.

Centuries later, the physician-turned-pastor Martyn Lloyd-Jones described Sibbes' gospel-centered preaching in medicinal terms: "The heavenly Doctor Sibbes . . . was a balm to my soul at a period in my life when I was overworked and badly overtired, and therefore subject in an unusual manner to the onslaughts of the devil. . . . His books [based on his sermons] quieted, soothed, comforted, encouraged, and healed me."²⁸

PHYSICIANS OF THE SOUL

That Sibbes could be effective despite the historical distance evidences just how skilled many Puritans were as physicians of the soul. As a result, they have much to say to us today about gospel-centered preaching.²⁹

The Puritans possessed what J. I. Packer called "a minute acquaintance with the human heart."³⁰ While historical caricatures tend to emphasize their external scrupulosity, in reality they aimed at the inner person by means of what they called the "plain style" of preaching. This method, as outlined by the renowned Puritan expositor William Perkins (1558–1602), encouraged preachers to first explain the text of Scripture, then describe its doctrinal significance, and finally to apply it to the particular "experiences and condition of the church."³¹ The best of the Puritans weren't content merely to defend doctrine from the pulpit; they sought to apply truth in the pews by engaging the hearts of their hearers. The directives below highlight five key strategies for applying the gospel to the heart.

28 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (1971; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 175.

29 Portions of this article are adapted from Matthew D. Haste and Shane W. Parker, *The Pastor's Life: Practical Wisdom from the Puritans* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2019).

30 J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision for the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 29.

31 William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying*, rev. ed. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1996), 65.

PURITAN PRESCRIPTIONS FOR GOSPEL-CENTERED PREACHING

1. Let Scripture Illustrate Scripture

Sibbes' sermons were full of the Bible because he recognized its role in transforming the heart. "Means do not make the heart tender," he noted, "but God through the use of means softens it by his Word."³² One practical outworking of this conviction was Sibbes' use of Scripture as a source for sermon illustrations.

For example, he encouraged his hearers to look to God himself for assurance of salvation, instead of trusting in the "the fig leaves of morality."³³ By calling to mind the well-known biblical image of fig leaves (Gen. 3:7), Sibbes provided a powerful contrast between the frail, useless attempts to secure one's own righteousness with the trustworthy foundation of gospel truth.

2. Make Use of Memorable Images

Sibbes explained the gospel with powerful pictures. He did not merely say, "See great things in little beginnings." He mused, "See a flame in a spark, a tree in a seed."³⁴ He not only called weary Christians to look to Christ, but advised, "When we feel ourselves cold in affection and duty, the best way is to warm ourselves at this fire of his love and mercy."³⁵ For believers who longed to maintain a tender heart, Sibbes encouraged, "Use the means of grace; be always under the sunshine of the gospel."³⁶

Such pictures conveyed truth by engaging the imagination. As Sibbes described, "The way to come to the heart is often to pass through the fancy [the imagination]."³⁷ He believed that "the

³² Sibbes, *The Tender Heart*, 19.

³³ Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed*, Puritan Paperbacks (1630; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2008), 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁶ Sibbes, *The Tender Heart*, 57.

³⁷ Sibbes, *Works*, 1:66.

putting of lively colors upon common truths hath oft a strong working both upon the fancy [the imagination] and our will and affections.”³⁸ These “lively colors” enhanced the appeal of “common truths” by engaging the heart.

3. Be Tender and Tactful

Sibbes counseled pastors to handle young believers with gentleness and to resist the temptation to be overbearing. A tender Savior shouldn’t inspire ill-tempered shepherds. That Sibbes managed such a disposition himself seems clear from his reputation among contemporaries and the way he was remembered by his colleagues. In his day, he was known as “the honey mouth” and “the sweet dropper” for his winsome ability to apply the gospel to tender consciences.

Sibbes’ diplomatic temperament may have contributed to his willingness to remain in the Church of England, even as some of his protégés began to dissent. In *The Bruised Reed*, Sibbes indirectly cautioned his comrades against being quick to censure other believers or to break fellowship over disputable matters. He valued tact and discretion, remarking, “Where most holiness is, there is most moderation, where it may be without prejudice of piety to God and the good of others. We see in Christ a marvelous temper of absolute holiness, with great moderation.”³⁹

4. Provide Practical Points of Application

Sibbes sought to comfort the troubled, but he also called the faithful to action. He counseled the “bruised reed” to embrace the work of God in his life, however painful it might be. “It is better to go bruised to heaven than sound to hell.”⁴⁰ The “smoking flax” must remember how God views her, despite her meager fai-

³⁸ Ibid., 1:184.

³⁹ Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed*, 33.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 13.

th. Christ considers not just who we are, but who he will make us to be, for he can fan a spark into a flame.

Such words of encouragement were accompanied by practical instructions for pursuing the means of grace. In *The Bruised Reed*, Sibbes specifically encouraged regular fellowship with other believers, the practice of spiritual disciplines, consistent attendance to hear preaching, and the exercise of grace through spiritual obedience.

5. Keep Christ at the Center

In Jesus alone, Sibbes proclaimed, “All perfections of mercy and love meet.”⁴¹ He spoke often of Christ and tied his expositions to the Son’s person and work. By drawing the heart’s attention to the mercy of Christ, Sibbes could counter discouragements, calm scruples, and conquer the heart’s deepest fears. Whatever the spiritual infirmity, the work of Christ supplies the cure: “There is more mercy in Christ than sin in us.”⁴²

Sibbes recognized the importance of both engaging the mind and stirring the affections with truths about Jesus. “Because knowledge and affection mutually help one another,” he argued, “it is good to keep up our affections of love and delight by all sweet inducements and divine encouragements; for what the heart likes best, the mind studies most.”⁴³ His preaching clearly aimed to inspire hearts to love Christ above all.

“UNDER THE SUNSHINE OF THE GOSPEL”

Sibbes and other Puritans provide a faithful example of gospel-centered preaching for pastors today. Though their context is surely different, they addressed the same concerns pastors see in ministry.

41 Ibid., 62.

42 Ibid., 33.

43 Ibid., 103.

Pastor, there are bruised reeds in your midst. Will you lend them strength or increase their burdens? There are smoldering wicks before you every week. Will you fan them into life or snuff them out? Your own heart is sure to grow cold at times. If your sermons will be gospel-centered, you must heed Sibbes' counsel: "Be always under the sunshine of the gospel." Bear this in mind and rest in the tender mercy of our Savior as you endeavor to lead others toward his light and easy yoke.

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Three Most Important Words I Learned in Seminary: “Textual, Epochal, Canonical”



David Schrock

Have you ever watched a movie in 3D? If so, you may have ducked to miss the incoming airplanes or screamed as sharks appeared to attack you. The sensory overload of three dimensions doesn't change the movie, but it does intensify the experience.

In this essay, I will argue that we need to read Scripture along three horizons. Like 3D glasses at an IMAX theater, these three horizons help us discover God's unfolding plan that finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ. They help us see what's going on (1) in the text, (2) in the covenant history of that text, and (3) how a multitude of texts revealed over time find their place in the whole

Bible. In sum, this approach looks at the Bible along textual, epochal (or covenantal), and canonical horizons.

Faithful interpreters must consider the grammar and history found at the textual level; they must also attend to the place any passage stands in covenantal history; and they must explain how this individual passage contributes to the whole Bible and is itself informed by the rest of Scripture.

Only as we learn how to read the Bible along these three horizons will we be able to see how the leaves and the trees (i.e., words and sentences) begin to form a well-ordered forest (the whole biblical canon), a forest that has come to us through many seasons of growth, decay, and rebirth (i.e., the progression of covenant that have led to Christ).

To help see the forest and the trees, let's consider each of these horizons.

THE TEXTUAL HORIZON

When Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, he said, "For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:18). Among other things, this verse tells us that every letter (iota) and every serif (dot) was inspired and important. Every word, every sentence, every proposition and poetic image is necessary for understanding the biblical text. Studying grammar and history is where interpretation begins; it's where we discover meaning as we grapple with the author's intent.

Eschewing postmodern theories of interpretation that places meaning in the reader, faithful interpretation seeks to know God's intentions through the intentions of the human author, which are conveyed in the grammar of the text. At the textual level, word usage, genre sensitivity, and literary structure are just some of the ways we ascertain the grammatical-historical meaning of the text.

Likewise, Greek and Hebrew lexicons, biblical concordances, and historical and cultural background studies help us to understand the Bible at the textual level.

Interpretation begins here, and we cannot move to the next two horizons until we have done the spadework. Often, errors in interpretation and sameness in preaching (i.e., making every Old Testament sermon sound the same) come from an inattention to the textual horizon. We cannot superimpose our theological framework on the text, even if that framework may shed light. We must see how the text in question is written to God's people first. Only then can we begin to make application to Christ and his church.

THE EPOCHAL / COVENENTAL HORIZON

The epochal horizon recognizes that the Bible isn't merely a catalogue of timeless truths. Rather, it's a progressively revealed testimony about God's redemption in history. Jesus made this point in Matthew 5:17, when he declared that he came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, not to destroy them.

On the whole, Scripture is written with a framework of promise and fulfillment. As Acts 13:32–33 says, “And we bring you the good news that what God *promised* to the fathers, this he has *fulfilled* to us their children by raising Jesus.” Likewise, Hebrews 1:1–2 reveals the superior revelation of Christ the Son to the prophets who served previous generations of believers.

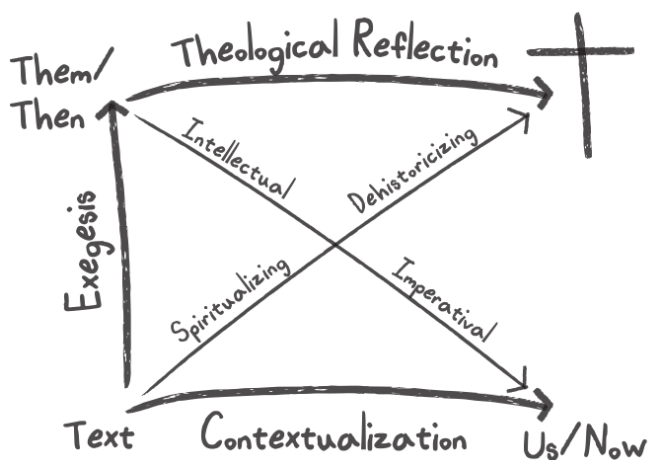
In Galatians 3 Paul even builds an argument for the gospel on the fact that the promise came 400 years before the Law. This means that if the order of the Bible is neglected, the faith once for all delivered to the saints will be undercut and the gospel put in jeopardy. Thus, in interpreting the Bible, we must always ask the question: *When is it?*

Sabbatarian differences notwithstanding, how many errors

in application would be prevented, if we realized that the Law of Moses is no longer directly applicable? The Old Testament is useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16), but the old covenant is no longer in service (see Hebrews). Stated differently, both Testaments are written *for* believers in Christ, but almost all the words in the Bible are not written *to* believers directly.⁴⁴

The most obvious example of this comes in 1 Corinthians 10, where Paul speaks of the events in Israel’s history as being written down for the church: “Now these things happened to them as an example, but *they were written down for our instruction*, on whom the end of the ages has come” (v. 11). This slight distinction between “written to” and “written for” has a significant payoff, and it requires discerning where a text fits in redemptive history in order to make an appropriate application.

Indeed, what was written to Israel only applies to the new covenant church as it’s mediated through Christ. David Helm’s graphic in *Expositional Preaching* and used in all the Simeon Trust workshops is particularly helpful on this point.⁴⁵



44 John 17:20ff might be one of a handful of passages that directly apply to the Christian today.

45 David Helm, *Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God’s Word Today* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 67.

The textual horizon leads you from “Text” to “Them/Then.” The epochal horizon takes you from “Them/Then” to Christ (his person and his work). And yet, more than just a straight, horizontal line, the epochal horizon follows a series of covenants. These seven different covenants include:

1. Adamic Covenant
2. Noahic Covenant
3. Abrahamic Covenant
4. Mosaic Covenant
5. Davidic Covenant
6. New Covenant of Peace⁴⁶

In the progression of covenantal history, these covenants organize the Bible and explain various promises and stipulations for the people of God. Faithful interpreters of any passage will be aware of these covenants and how they relate to a given passage of Scripture. Without this awareness, we’ll unavoidably make errors in application.

THE CANONICAL / CHRISTOLOGICAL HORIZON

From the first promise of salvation in Genesis 3:15 to its full consummation in Revelation 21–22, all creation is moving toward Christ (see Eph. 1:10). Figuratively speaking, Scripture is written in italics. The Old Testament slants forward towards the Son who is to come. Similarly, some parts of the New Testament slant backward to the finished work of Christ, while others slant forward to his return. As Jesus taught his disciples, all Scripture points to him (John 5:39; cf. Luke 24:27). Faithful interpretation of any portion of the Bible must see how any passage stands in relations-

⁴⁶ The point here is not to distinguish between covenantal systems, but to recognize the major covenants in Scripture, however they are understood.

hip to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This Christ-centered approach to interpretation shows how 66 different books find their unity in the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁴⁷ Paul himself says the gospel was preached beforehand to Abraham (Gal. 3:8), and Peter says that the Spirit of Christ was leading the prophets to speak of Christ's sufferings and glory (1 Pet. 1:10–12).

The Bible is unified, therefore, not only because it comes from the same God, but because it all points to the same God-man, Jesus Christ. Jesus is not only a mediator between God and man in salvation (1 Tim. 2:5), but as the goal of creation and revelation (Eph. 1:10), he is also the mediator between human readers and God's inspired Word. Paul's words to the church in 1 Corinthians 10:11 make sense because the church is *in Christ*. And those who are in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, now have authorization to call the Hebrew Scriptures their own.

With respect to interpretation, every text has a place in the Bible's covenantal framework. Every text is organically related to the covenantal history that leads to Christ. In other words, every text has Christ as its final goal. He's not anachronistically transported back into the time of Israel or imported into texts that are foreign to him. Finding Jesus in obscure parts of the Old Testament is worlds apart from finding Jesus in Harry Potter. Rather, as he has told us on many occasions, all the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings are about him. So we have justification to look for Jesus in all parts of the Old Testament. No interpretation is complete until it comes to Christ.

Certainly, this approach is not neutral but biased—biased by Christian belief. The alternative is an approach to reading the Bible agnostically, where there's uncertainty about seeing

⁴⁷ Such misapplication has led some evangelicals to reject the approach I am advocating here. In response, I would merely say that those who separate passages in the Old Testament into categories of "about Christ" and "not about Christ" have not considered fully the implications this has on the unity of the Bible and how every passage in the Bible contributes to a book that is intended to say something about God in Christ.

Christ—uncertainty until all doubts have been erased by human examination. This approach may try to “honor the text,” but it’s inconsistent with the main point of Scripture: to see the Incarnate Word in all of God’s Word. This is what the Christological horizon does, as it stands upon the observations of the textual and epochal horizon.

READING THE BIBLE CHRISTIANLY

I’m persuaded that unless we learn how to read Scripture along these three horizons—textual, epochal, canonical—we’ll miss the power and wisdom of Christ that’s found in the whole counsel of God. When we see Christ from all parts of the Bible, we’ll become more like him in all parts of our lives. After all, this is the goal of all biblical interpretation: to become three-dimensional image-bearers whose likeness to Christ is produced by the Word and the Spirit.

This approach to reading Scripture doesn’t mean we’ll perfectly understand or apply God’s Word. Scripture is perfect; interpreters aren’t. There are many pitfalls in moving from the text through the covenants to Christ, but to cite David Helm again, the “long way around is the safest way home.”⁴⁸

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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⁴⁸ Spoken at a recent Simeon Trust event.

Must You Share the Gospel in Every Sermon? Invitation Without the Altar Call



Aaron Menikoff

I'll never forget the first time I heard the gospel preached. On one hand, I was mesmerized—he spoke straight to me, as if I was the only person in the room. On the other hand, I thought it must be a trick. Perhaps seminary trained him to preach in such a way that everyone felt singled out, like the eyes of the Mona Lisa following each person who walks by.

Eventually, I realized the gospel had gripped me. His sermons were neither expositional nor rich doctrinally. But the preacher knew God saves by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and he made that clear every time he spoke. Week after week, he preached that simple message, and even-

tually I believed it. Like Lydia by the riverside, God used his gospel to open my heart.

Now I'm the preacher. I do work through books of the Bible. I labor to feed God's sheep sound doctrine. We regularly have non-Christians in attendance, and I desperately want them to hear the gospel that saved me so many years ago. I also recognize it's not just non-Christians who need the gospel—it's Christians, too.

We should preach the gospel in every sermon because no preacher can do better than the Apostle Paul who said to the church in Corinth: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). We should call listeners to repentance and faith in every sermon because the Day is coming quickly, "the appointed time has grown very short" (1 Cor. 7:29).

But how do we *thoughtfully* deliver the message of a crucified and risen Savior along with the call to repentance and faith from every text we handle? In many churches, the answer is simple: an altar call. Regardless of the text, the pastor ends his sermon by urging the audience to make a physical response. He calls for a decision and then exhorts them to respond by walking an aisle, raising a hand, or even being baptized on-the-spot. I've explained before why I think altar calls do more harm than good, but even in churches with no altar calls, sometimes the gospel invitation seems forced or wooden. Carl Trueman pointed out the hokeyness of such messages, calling them "contrived contortions of passages to produce the answer 'Jesus' every week. It doesn't matter what the text is; the sermon is always the same."⁴⁹

How can we preach the Bible faithfully, keeping Christ and his gospel front-and-center? How can we deliver the main point of the sermon *and* call sinners to repentance and faith? Over the years, I've sought to heed the counsel of the Welsh minister quoted by C. H. Spurgeon:

⁴⁹ Carl R. Trueman, *The Wages of Spin: Critical Writings on Historic and Contemporary Evangelicalism* (Christian Focus, 2004), 172.

I have never yet found a text that had not got a road to Christ in it, and if I ever do find one that has not a road to Christ in it, I will make one; I will go over hedge and ditch but I would get at my Master, for the sermon cannot do any good unless there is a savour of Christ in it.⁵⁰

The gospel should be in every sermon, but the road will often look different. Here are some examples of how I walked “the road to Christ” in passages where the way might be unclear. Here are some ways I invited men and women to come to Christ without an altar call.

ACTS 16:6–10, “MAKE MUCH OF CHRIST”

In this passage, Luke recounts Paul bumping around modern-day Turkey looking for a city to evangelize. God’s Spirit surprisingly stopped him from going to Asia and Bithynia before finally making it clear he needed to cross the Aegean Sea. Most astonishing is the vision God gave Paul of a man pleading with him to come to Macedonia.

This is a great passage to talk about the Holy Spirit, visions, how God guides today, and why believers don’t receive the same, clear-cut direction as did Paul and his team. But to focus simply on God’s guidance and decision-making would be to miss the forest through the trees. The overarching point of this passage is that the Spirit sent Paul and his team to the Macedonians in order “to preach the gospel to them” (Acts 16:10). The Spirit is at work ensuring the gospel of Jesus is proclaimed.

Admittedly, the road to Christ is pretty clear-cut. How might a preacher bring the gospel to bear in this sermon? Perhaps like this:

None of us are apostles and few of us are pastors, but we’re all called to make much of Christ. To be a Christian is to exalt Christ in

50 C. H. Spurgeon, “Christ Precious to Believers” (13 May 1859). Found at <https://archive.spurgeon.org/sermons/0242.php>.

word and deed—in the office, the cafeteria, and the classroom. How do you know the Holy Spirit is guiding you? You’ve given your life to this gospel—to this message of the Lord who died on the cross and rose from the dead in order to bring forgiveness. Make much of him! We live in a world full of people who like to say that are “spiritual but not religious.” Remember, you are not truly “spiritual” unless you have turned from your sins and trusted in Christ—this is Exhibit A of the Spirit’s influence in your life.

PSALM 77, “HE HAS DELIVERED US”

It’s not always obvious how to preach the gospel from the Psalms. Some paths to Christ are certainly clearer than others. For example, Psalm 2 is cited in Acts 4 and applied to the crucifixion of Christ. Psalm 110 is quoted by Peter in Acts 2 and applied to the resurrection. The road to Christ in these Psalms is a mile wide!

But what about Psalm 77? The psalmist despairs; at times he’s too disturbed to speak (77:4). God seems distant (77:7). And yet, amidst his sorrow he looks back and remembers “the deeds of the LORD.” He recalls the day God saved Israel from bondage to Egypt. God went to war for his people. His “way was through the sea” and “his path through the great waters” (77:19)—clearly a reference to the Exodus.

Now the road to Christ stands out. God still rescues; he still redeems! Describing a new exodus, Paul writes of the LORD, “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13–14). The hope in Psalm 77 is not to blandly trust in God; it’s to exercise vibrant faith in a crucified and risen Savior. Perhaps you could tell the congregation:

Christian, God didn’t free you from Egypt. He freed you from something far worse. He freed you from the domain of darkness. From slavery to your sin. And it’s not like God simply took the

chains off and told you to run for your life. No, God did it all. He fought for you, he released you, he forgave you entirely. And how did he do it? Through the God-man Jesus. Here's what you need to believe: he lived, he died, he rose for sinners. You deserve the wrath of God. Christ is your only hope. Turn to him now. He will save you.

1 KINGS 12:25–14:20, “HEARTS THAT SEEK THE LORD”

Sometimes it's wise to preach long texts because it helps Christians see the Bible's big picture. This lengthy passage is about the judgment that comes upon Jeroboam for leading Israel into idolatry. Jeroboam made golden calves thinking it would keep his people from turning back to Rehoboam, the king of Judah.

This passage is also about a deceitful prophet from Israel who tempted the prophet from Judah to doubt God's Word. God told the prophet from Judah to deliver his message to the northern kingdom and return home—no pit stops! But the prophet from Israel sinfully convinced him to stay. In fact, we are told, “he lied to him” (1 Ki. 13:18). Still, the prophet from Judah knew better. He had God's Word but he denied it, giving into the false prophet's lie.

Not every insertion of the gospel into a sermon is a call to salvation. For example, at this point, seeing the foolishness of the prophet from Judah, a preacher might tell his church:

Like that prophet from Judah, we're tempted to doubt God's Word. His sin should remind us of Paul's warning in Galatians 1:8, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.” Let's preserve and protect the gospel. It's the most precious news ever delivered! Don't be like that prophet from Judah who gave into the lie. Protect the Good News of the Savior from Bethlehem who lived the life we should have lived and died the death we deserved to die.

This, of course, isn't the main idea of 1 Kings 12:25–14:20, and it's not even the best path to the gospel. That's found in 1 Kings 14, when God's judgment falls on Jeroboam. The king is told by the LORD, "You have not been like my servant David, who kept my commandments and followed me with all his heart" (1 Ki. 14:8). How did Jeroboam rebel? Many ways, but in a parallel passage in 2 Chronicles we're told Jeroboam kicked all the faithful priests out of the northern kingdom. These priests weren't like Jeroboam. They "set their hearts to seek the LORD" and in so doing they "strengthened the kingdom of Judah" (11:16, 17).

The road to Christ has now been cracked wide open. You can tell your congregation:

We all need hearts set to seek the Lord. Such hearts won't come as we try to build our own kingdom the way Jeroboam did. There is only one source of true heart change: faith in the redeeming blood of Christ. What those faithful priests looked forward to, we look backward to—a Savior, as Peter said, who "bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live for righteousness" (1 Pet. 2:24). Put your faith in him today!

No altar call shouldn't mean no call to repentance and faith. No altar call shouldn't mean no gospel. But to preach the gospel faithfully requires careful Bible study and prayer. Sometimes the road to Christ is wider, and sometimes it's narrower. But it's always there, and the faithful preacher will call believers and unbelievers alike to repentance and faith whenever the Book is opened.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Gospel-Centered Preaching in Hard Places



Andy Prime

I've been in ministry for about ten years. The first half of that decade I preached largely in chinos, a v-neck sweater, and boat shoes. The second half of that decade I've preached largely in tracksuit-bottoms, t-shirts, and trainers. That's not down to a change in personal stylist, but due to a change in ministry context. I've moved from being on staff at a large, city-center church, to a small, local church in a housing scheme. The context change has led to a wardrobe change.

Being asked to write this article's forced me to scrutinize what else has changed about my preaching ministry other than my outfit. It forced me to re-watch some of the videos from those first five years. And as many of you know, listening to your own voice is always misery. But listening back to sermons from your first five years in ministry? That's absolute torture. If I believed in pur-

gatory, I think my purifying recompense would be to have to listen to my entire back-catalogue.

But here's what some of this suffering yielded: in some core ways there's not that much difference.

WHAT'S THE SAME

Image of God

After all, every single human being—regardless of race, gender, class, health, age—is created in the image of God. Far more unites us than divides us. Fallen humanity has a perverted inclination to draw lines, create divisions, form cliques, and build walls in order to keep those who are different from us away from us. But God's design in creation and redemption delights in togetherness. Gospel-centered preaching to image-bearing humans will hold the same rough shape regardless of context.

Clarity of Scripture

Because of my belief in the clarity of Scripture, my preaching in the last five years hasn't been dumbed down. Preaching in a hard place is still Word ministry. The clarity of Scripture isn't muddied by context, and the command to preach is not gagged by context. I've heard some churches in areas like ours describe their services as "short and fun," as if "long and serious" was beyond people here. Let's be clear: a hard place doesn't equal a stupid place. I know stupid rich people, and I know intelligent poor people. But if being a Christian in a hard place is going to be hard, then shallow, superficial stuff on a Sunday won't cut it. To go hard in a hard place, we'll need to go deep in preaching.

Gospel Centrality

Our conviction on the centrality of the gospel itself means that the content of my preaching has been the same over the last ten

years. I've moved to a setting where there are a lot more social needs. But more social problems don't require a social gospel. The greatest need of every single person I've met in the last ten years has been salvation from their sins. And the only hope for every person I've met in the last ten years has been the Lord Jesus Christ. So, regardless of context, we proclaim him. And we proclaim him from all the Scriptures.

Give me a football anywhere in the world. I'll find some players, we'll know the rules, and we'll play the same game. The same thing's true of preaching. It doesn't matter where you plunk down a pulpit; I'll preach to fellow image-bearers, I'll do it from the Scriptures, and it will be about salvation in Jesus. Doesn't matter where in the world you play it, it's still the same beautiful game. Doesn't matter where in the world you preach it, it's still the same urgent ministry.

So the silhouette's the same. Some of the details, however, are definitely different. No doubt—some of that's simply due to my growth as a preacher. If your preaching hasn't progressed over the course of a decade, then you're probably an appalling preacher. Other changes, however, are specific to preaching the gospel in a hard place.

WHAT'S CHANGED

Here's why: fundamental to any communication is the principle that who you're speaking to impacts how you speak to them. Dialogue between different people differs. I speak differently to a toddler than I do to a colleague. I speak differently to a native English speaker than I do to someone who's just learning English. I speak differently to my mates than I speak to a judge in court. Language changes. Tone changes. Speed changes. Words change. Sometimes, it may happen naturally. Other times, it's painstakingly hard. But at all times it's necessary.

Although most preaching is entirely monologue, good preaching feels like dialogue. Your preaching prep must be bi-focal. And so because whom I'm now speaking to has changed, my preaching has necessarily changed. If it didn't, I'd be preaching in vain.

As preachers, we're often quick to speak and slow to listen. But the key to being a preacher people will listen to in a hard place is being a preacher who listens to them about what makes life hard.

So here are the two unbelievably basic things that have changed my preaching over the last five years:

1. Listening to people's stories

I'm from a culture where questions are a normal and critical part of any communication. In my current culture, however, too many questions make you sound like a police officer or a social worker. Instead, conversation revolves around stories being shared; the story-teller remains in control of how much they self-reveal, rather than questions assaulting them into unconsented revelation.

This impacts how you preach. My tendency in preaching would be reduce everything in Scripture—from narrative to poetry—into a stereotypical, three-point, logic-driven, question-and-answer style sermon. That's probably not helpful (or faithful!) preaching in any context, but least of all mine. It's taught me to respect the genre, preserve the tone, and unfold the stories in a way that's faithful to whatever text I'm preaching rather than what's just natural to how I've been trained to think and communicate in my culture.

But beyond the story-telling culture at large, the story of both my community and individuals in my church have impacted how I preach. What do I mean? Well, here's a few examples.

- Story after story revealed a matriarchal culture. This impacted how I preached through what the Bible says about headship, submission, and women in ministry.

- Story after story revealed a suspicion of people in authority. This impacted how I preached through what the Bible says about eldership and church governance.
- Story after story revealed that a large percentage of the community have suffered as victims of abuse. This impacted how I explained that all humanity are guilty rebels facing the punishment of a holy God.
- Story after story revealed fathers who were either absent or abusive. This impacted how I preached on the Fatherhood of God
- Story after story revealed endless relapses in the life of a Christian addict. This impacted how I preached on repentance and Christ's victory over sin.

I didn't hear stories like these in my first five years. But upon hearing them, if they don't impact how I preach, I'm giving my community the impression that God's not really for them. But he is. And thankfully, in the Bible, you don't have to look far to find families and churches that fall into the same mistakes we do, and need the same powerful, saving grace we need.

Hear me right. I'm not saying the stories in our community change what we believe or what we teach. Instead, they shape *how* we approach these truths pastorally so that we can apply them sensitively in our preaching.

It also means the majority of my illustrations come from within the community rather than outside of it. It means the emotional range of my preaching tries to match the emotional range of my community. It means my level of vulnerability seeks to reflect how much credibility the culture places on transparency and openness.

I also endeavor to scrutinize my sermon notes to ensure that every word is in the vernacular of my community. At the heart of the Reformation was a zealous drive to get the Word of God

and the preaching in the pulpits translated from Latin into the language of the people. Strangely, many people today who love the Reformation still seem to go about quoting Latin phrases (I'll resist from ending this article with a "SDG"). But you don't have to speak in Latin to be incomprehensible. You can speak a dialect of Christian jargon in English and you might as well be speaking Latin. The people I've come to know through the stories I've listened to are those who need to hear the gospel in a way they can understand. I'm called to preach for the people in my community that aren't in the room yet, but if they were to walk in they'd understand every single word.

2. Listening to people's questions

The lecturer at seminary who taught our preaching class taught us what have become two of the most important questions in my preaching prep: "What's the biggest objection a Christian would have to this text?" and "What's the biggest objection an unbeliever would have to this text?" The usefulness of these questions lie at the heart of why good preaching feels like dialogue, even though it's largely a monologue. As you study a text, you try to discern what your hearers' strongest objections to the text will be. Good preaching raises such questions, tackles them head-on, and then answers them.

A change in context often means a change in questions. In my first five years, in coming to a text like the Passover in Exodus 11–12, the predominant question in my head would probably have been something like, "How can God harden Pharaoh's heart and still hold him accountable for his wickedness?" That's a legitimate question, and one you'll probably have to answer. But an unbeliever probably has more basic questions, like "How can you love a God who kills babies?" You might even get asked, "What's an Exodus?" and "Who's Moses?" We forget that people don't know what we already know.

The questions people are asking in Gracemount are different to the questions I had to answer before. I was used to the theoretical, apologetic questions that largely came from an atheistic and skeptical point of view. In Gracemount, I've never had to convince someone of God's existence or the reality of the afterlife. Instead, almost every question I've been asked has come from trauma rather than theory.

I remember caring for a mum whose son died. Her first two questions to me: "Is he in hell because he hadn't been baptized?" and "If I commit suicide, will I go to hell too?" They reveal not only a supernatural worldview, but also cultural Catholicism.

What about the lad who's reading the Bible with me? He asks questions like, "If I become a Christian, will I have to forgive my dad for all the ways he abused me?" Or the hyper-vigilant, paranoid addict whose main questions when we're preaching through Exodus are about the conspiracies surrounding aliens being the builders of the pyramids. Or the Christian who questions whether or not their mental-health struggles caused by drug-use prevent them from usefulness in the church. Or the daughter who wants me to confirm that what the local Spiritualist medium told her about her Catholic mum being in heaven is true.

If I fail to address these questions, or if I somehow communicate that they're "weird," I'm giving my community the impression that God's not really for them. But he is. And so they're the questions I must dialogue with in my preaching.

Here's my task as a preacher in a hard place: to preach the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to those asking these questions, and living these stories. So my preaching in my hard place may not even work in your pulpit in your hard place, because the stories and how they're told will be different, and the questions and why they're asked will be different. Sermons preached in hard places will probably be sermons whose usefulness is limited to their postcode.

See, it's not my job merely to preach the gospel. The task of a preacher isn't simply to place raw ingredients in front of his hearers and expect them to cook the meal from scratch. It's to provide a fully cooked meal for the hearers to feast. A sermon devoid of application is like the church at Sardis in Revelation 3. It gives the appearance of life, but it's dead.

Many people in our community feel forgotten by those in authority. They feel like the government is miles out of touch. They feel like no-one listens to them. They feel like no decisions made in parliament are ever going to make any difference where they are. That attitude filters its way into the church, which I partly understand. Many churches have abandoned our communities, and so it does seem like that.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

So here's some practical ways that we as elders have sought to ensure that our preaching lands on our hearers.

Service Structure

We've adopted an order of service where the preaching happens near the beginning. We have a call to worship. We sing. We pray. And then we preach. Part of the reason for that is that we want people to feel in the weekly rhythm of our gathering that God is God, and as such he has the authority and right to speak first. And then everything we do is in response to that. We think that's a helpful model for our people to then mimic in their daily devotions: hear God speak in the pages of the Bible first, and then worship and pray in response to that.

But the other reason for front-loading the sermon is to model and further explain how these truths are then applied. We don't want to just preach, sing, and then leave. We want to preach, dwell, and further apply. So following the sermon we sing songs that

directly respond to what's been preached. Following the songs, we read from another passage of Scripture that draws out specific applications. Following the reading we usually have some kind of related corporate response to read together; that may be the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed, the Ten Commandments, or a confession of sin. Following this, we'll pray through these applications of the sermon. The revelation of God in the preaching directs and schools our prayers, and so models, especially to new believers, how we ought to pray.

This is just another way of saying that the liturgy of our Sunday gatherings all aims at dialoguing with our own specific congregation about how the specific text we've looked at today answers our specific questions and can transform our specific stories. So we preach first, in order to allow time to show how God's authority is not only for our good, but it's for us personally.

Weekly Devotions

We provide a handout for our sermons each Sunday, which on one side simply has some of the main headlines from the sermon to aid engagement and memory. On the reverse side, we list devotions for Monday to Saturday that again flow from the sermon. There may be other passages to read and pray through, or songs to sing and reflect on, or verses to memorize and employ, or prompts to encourage other members, or specific items of local or international interest to pray for. But they all relate to the sermon. We want to help people drill deep into the Scriptures and meditate on their relevance to their everyday lives. And there's not many off-the-shelf devotional materials written for our context. So we write them ourselves.

We encourage those in our congregation who are in one-to-one discipling relationships to use these devotions when they meet. We've started using our mid-week Bible studies to continue to study the passages and truths preached on Sunday.

The purpose of a sermon isn't complete until its truths are believed and applied. And so the job of the preacher isn't complete when he shuts his Bible and steps out of the pulpit.

So, if I had to say all this in a tweet: Make your sermon monologues feel like dialogues, by listening hard to people's stories and questions, and then laboring hard to connect the living Word to your specific hard place.

ADDENDUM

If I could recommend one book for you to read, I'd check out Charles Spurgeon's *Practical Wisdom* [or *Plain Advice for Plain People*] published by the Banner of Truth. In the preface Spurgeon writes, "I have written for ploughmen and common people. Hence refined taste and dainty words have been disregarded for strong proverbial expressions and homely phrases. I have aimed my blows at the vices of the many, and tried to inculcate those moral virtues without which men are degraded. Much that needs to be said to the toiling masses would not well suit the pulpit and the Sabbath; these lowly pages may teach thrift and industry all the days of the week in the cottage and the workshop; and if some learn these lessons I shall not repent the adoption of a rustic style."

We need more present-day pastors and authors to adapt their style for those in the hardest places. And if I can disagree with Spurgeon for a second, we need it in the pulpit and on the Sabbath as well.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Preaching to Different Kinds of Hearers



Jonathan Leeman

The preacher's task is to hold up reality as the Bible presents it, and to ask how it compares to what his hearers have been calling reality. He asks if all the promises that sin has been making to them have turned out to be true. He shows them that the Bible is, in fact, a better interpreter of their experience. And then he points them to the warnings and promises that it personally makes to them.

Doing this well, of course, means the preacher must understand what his hearers believe—the warp and woof of their false worlds. His goal is to confront those beliefs precisely. Here are three categories that influence every person and which the preacher must confront:

First, worldviews. Often a person's response to Scripture is dictated by worldview presuppositions that he or she is not even aware of. Philippians tells us to look to the interests of others (2:3–5),

but to what extent does our materialism limit how sacrificially we're willing to do this? Hebrews 13:17 tells us to submit to our leaders, but does our individualism and radical egalitarianism hinder our ability to heed such a command? Jesus tells us to take up our crosses (Luke 9:23–25), but are we too loaded down with entitlements to hear Him? A preacher does not need to use words like “consumerism,” “relativism,” “naturalism,” and “emotivism.” But he should know how to expose and disarm them.

Second, spiritual state. I assume that every listener, at some level, struggles with *idolatry*, *self-justification*, and *the love of the world*. A preacher should always do battle with these enemies. At the same time, preachers must preach to people in different spiritual states. Paul identifies the *idle*, the *timid*, and the *weak*, each of whom require slightly different challenges (1 Thess. 5:12–14).

When I'm planning my sermons or Bible study lessons, I also try to think through three sets of pairs. I want to address both *Christians and non-Christians*. I want to address both the *complacent and needy*. And I want to address both the *legalistic and hedonistic*. Each of these categories requires a different kind of challenge. The complacent need to hear God's warnings, while the needy need to hear his promises. The legalistic need to hear about grace, while the licentious may need to be challenged by imperatives. The difficulty, of course, is to challenge one side of the pair while not causing the other side to stumble.

I might have erred too far in one direction in a recent devotion that I gave. I offered a challenge which was intended (in my mind) for the complacent crowd. But after the sermon one helpful brother observed that my challenge might have caused undue grief among those who are especially guilt-prone. If I ever give that particular devotion again, I may offer the same challenge, but I'll qualify it more carefully.

Third, social state. In preparing a sermon, a preacher should consider how to aim the burden of the text at different kinds of

people: What does the text mean for men or for women? For children and adults? For people moving toward retirement? For people who make a lot of money? For people who struggle to pay the bills? For employers and employees? For singles, marrieds, and widowed? For members of a minority ethnicity and the majority ethnicity? For foreigners? For parents? People encounter the Word differently depending on their station or season of life. A good teacher wants to help them wherever they are.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This has been adapted from Jonathan's book Word-Centered Church. Reprinted with permission.

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Discipling and Developing Leaders Through a Sermon Application Team



Mark Vroegop

“What do you think went well with Sunday’s sermon? What could have been better?”
This is how I begin every Sermon Application Team meeting.

Over the last five years, I’ve probably asked these questions a thousand times with a small group of both lay and staff leaders. This weekly gathering is one of the most productive venues for discipleship and developing leaders.

It gives me a window into the life of our church, enables me to identify future leaders, creates a unique teaching environment, connects me to lay and staff leaders, and (frankly) helps me preach better sermons.

I can’t imagine sermon preparation without it.

THE IDEA

Sermon Application Team wasn't my idea. Like most of the creative things in ministry, it's a combination of what I've seen others model. During a sabbatical, I attended the Weekender at Capitol Hill Baptist Church. Mark Dever invited me to attend his Saturday Sermon Application Team meeting, and I marveled at the simplicity and impact of a small group of lay leaders studying the text together. I watched with wonder as they studied a passage, debated its meaning, and shared applications. The Weekender also featured a service review meeting on Sunday nights where pastors and interns shared affirmations and critiques from the services earlier in the day.

Inspired by my experience, I considered how to implement these ideas in my context. For a number of reasons, a Saturday lunch and a late-night Sunday evening meeting were not feasible. So, I combined the best of both meetings into a late Tuesday afternoon meeting that fit my weekly study rhythm and our church cadence.

THE BASICS

Our sermon application team usually includes six people. A pastoral resident serves as the administrator. Two non-pastoral staff members and three lay people are part of the team. Sometimes, we have a guest or a visiting pastor who are curious enough to join us for a meeting or two.

We meet for 75 minutes, long enough for a good conversation but short enough that people long for more. Each participant serves on the team for eight weeks which allows me to intentionally invest in at least 25 leaders a year.

Our meetings follow a particular rhythm (each section lasting 15 minutes):

1. Review the Previous Week's Sermon

During this first section, we discuss the sermon I preached the previous Sunday. We start with affirmations, and I ask each person to share one or two things that they found helpful. I've found this to be fairly easy for most people. They enjoy reflecting on how the Lord spoke to them.

However, things get a little interesting when I ask for constructive criticism. I often have to coax people into sharing because they're unaccustomed to tell their pastor—to his face—what was wrong with the sermon. Sometimes I have to explain that every sermon can be better in some way, and I know the sermon could be improved.

It's remarkable how helpful affirmations and godly criticism of the sermon can be. At one level, it's instructive to hear how my words were received, understand what was meaningful, and wrestle with what was misunderstood or unclear. Even if I don't fully agree with the affirmation or the critique, it's a great opportunity to see how my people are processing my sermons. Additionally, it models how to respond to godly criticism and makes future leaders more open to critique as well.

Being vulnerable about the most personal aspect of my ministry—the sermon—has created a healthier culture of feedback in our church.

2. Study the Text Together

The second step in our journey is to examine next week's text together. We provide a print-out of the text with plenty of space for notes. We spend time quietly examining the passage on our own. For about 7–8 minutes, we circle important words, look for patterns, underline essential statements, and identify questions. The goal is simply to make as many observations as we can on our own.

Then it's time to share. We move around the table identifying short observations. The goal is not long soliloquies. Even if the participants

have researched the text prior to coming (something I encourage but don't require), our goal is simple and clear observations. Sometimes we pause to talk about a critical issue, or I ask a Pastoral Resident to explain the background behind a particular topic in the text.

As we make our way through the passage, I'm not only getting a good sense of their spiritual competency for handling the Word, but I'm also teaching people how to study the Bible. It's a beautiful discipleship and leadership development opportunity.

3. Create a Teaching Outline

The third step can be intimidating. We take additional personal time to create a teaching or homiletical outline. Since this is usually unfamiliar, I encourage them that this will be their greatest area of personal growth during our time together.

Going around the table, I ask each participant to share their outline. Sometimes we talk about how they determined each point. At other times, we compare the similarities and differences. I share my outline at the end, and I invite their feedback.

It might surprise you to know that nearly every week my first outline is not reflected in my final sermon. The thoughts and perspectives of the Sermon Application Team usually shape the structure. Sometimes I prefer their outline over mine, and I use it instead.

4. Identify Applications

The final step during our meeting is to consider the various ways the points in the text could be applied. Mark Dever created a very helpful application grid that you can use. Sometimes, we use this grid or a variation of it.

At other times we discuss how the text would apply to three groups: non-believer, believer, fake-believer. Given the nature of a particular text, I've also found it helpful to discuss how the text would apply to people in varying stages of life: child, teenager, single adult, married, and a senior citizen.

The goal of this step is to creatively make the connection between the text and life, especially in the lives of the people around the table.

By the time we've completed our meeting, we've thoughtfully reviewed the sermon, shared observations on a particular text, developed a teaching outline, and discussed applications. It's a discipleship-rich environment.

THE BENEFITS

Creating a sermon application team takes time, patience, and humility. But the benefits are incredible.

It creates a venue for life-on-life discipleship and personal leadership development as you study the text together. It promotes a culture of teachability as the Teaching Pastor willingly invites critique and suggestions. It keeps a pastor connected to questions and challenges of lay people. People have told me that they notice a difference in the sharpness and relevancy of my applications. I do, too.

It's also a great place to identify future leaders. When we're considering a person for leadership, I'm often asked about their participation in a team. Eight weeks of studying the Bible and talking about sermons give you a window into a person's soul.

Sundays come every week. Sermons need to be written. Applications must be considered. And I've found great delight and lots of fruit from studying every week with a group of leaders.

I can't think of a better venue for discipleship and leadership development than a weekly Sermon Application Team. And after five years, I can't imagine writing a sermon without them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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How Long Should a Sermon Be?



Jonathan Leeman

How long should you preach on Sunday? Pew Research Center recently analyzed 50,000 sermons preached between April 7 and June 1, 2019, in order to determine the median sermon length in the United States. Their answer? 37 minutes.

In response, I asked a few pastors how long they thought a sermon should be. Timothy Keller, founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian, remarked, “In general I think for most Sunday congregations the sermon should be under 30 minutes. That’s safest. If you are a solid preacher but not very eloquent or interesting it should also be shorter.”

Mark Vroegop, pastor of College Park Church in Indianapolis, IN, thinks pastors should go a bit longer: “35 to 40 minutes. I think that is long enough to adequately explain the texts and sensitive to the shortened listening ability of most people.”

Pushing the envelope, Adam Sinnett, who pastors a young and vibrant congregation in Seattle, argues, “The sermon should be as long as needed to clearly communicate the point of the passage, apply it to the hearts of God’s people, while removing potential obstacles, and delivering with passionate persuasion. That typically takes 40 to 50 minutes, depending on the size of the passage.”

And then there is Mark Dever, who rarely preaches for less than sixty minutes at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC. His counsel is shorter than his sermons: “A sermon should be as long as a preacher can well preach and a congregation can well listen.”

CONTEXT MATTERS

Interestingly, the Pew survey also noticed that differences show up across Christian traditions. The median sermon length for

- historically black Protestants was 54 minutes;
- evangelicals: 39 minutes;
- mainline Protestants: 25 minutes;
- and Roman Catholics: 14 minutes.

Different social settings come with different expectations. People walking into a Roman Catholic parish generally expect a homily that’s three times shorter than what a member of a black church expects of their sermon.

Keller observes, “I’ve seen people in Asia sit and listen to an address—without anyone fidgeting or getting up—for two hours. In other times and centuries, a two to three hour address would not have been thought of as too long. I think our culture in general is habituating people for shorter presentations.”

And if expectations change from context to context, doesn’t that suggest pastors might work to change cultural expectations rather than treating them as fixed?

FIVE PRINCIPLES

As you navigate how long a sermon should be for your context, let me offer five principles:

1. Do justice to the text.

If the wisdom of God gives life to the dead, not the wisdom of man, the most important thing we do in any sermon is to adequately explain and apply the text.

“A sermon should be long enough to explain, prove, and apply the main point of the passage,” said my own pastor John Joseph, “in such a way that the hearer is able to understand, appreciate, and begin digesting what God is saying to them.”

Duke Kwon, pastor of Grace DC, Meridian Hill Church in Washington, DC, remarked, “A good sermon, like a healthy meal, should be *nutritious*, which is to say, it allows for ample time to do faithful exposition and application of the text.”

H. B. Charles, pastor of Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida, also remarked, “The goal should be to preach long enough to faithfully treat the text and short enough to effectively communicate to the congregation.”

Kevin DeYoung, pastor of Christ Covenant in Charlotte, NC, said something similar: “A sermon should be long enough to adequately exegete and apply the main point of the passage, but short enough to leave mature Christians willing to listen a few minutes longer.”

2. Know your audience.

Yet it's not enough to say we must do justice to a text. If I asked you to summarize a two-hour movie for me, you could do that in one minute or in twenty. So with any passage of Scripture, a sermon must be nutritious, said Kwon. He clarified: “By this I don't mean *long*, as some of our best preaching will be the poignant one-pointer that cuts to the heart.”

A second principle must therefore be to know our audience. Just as we teach 5-year-olds differently than 25-year-olds, so different churches might be prepared for different lengths of sermons. The Pew survey reveals as much.

“Any time range will be culturally conditioned,” said DeYoung. Putting these first two points together, therefore, DeYoung aims for 40 minutes: “I would say that consistently being limited to fewer than 25 minutes makes robust exegesis difficult, while normally preaching longer than 45-50 minutes should be reserved for the most mature congregations and the most experienced expositors. In most contexts I’ve been a part of, I’d say 40 minutes for regular congregational preaching is a good sweet spot.”

Kwon argues that adjusting your length to your audience is a requirement of love: “a good sermon will also be preached in light of cultural oratory norms, which is not to say *captive* to cultural norms (sound bite preaching), nor do I mean this in substitute of homiletical nutrition (see above). It’s simply a matter of loving our actual, rather than theoretical, flock—that is, you are not preaching to Jonathan Edwards’ flock, you are preaching to your beloved smartphone-addicted flock. Love the ‘weaker brother’ and his/her (your!) shorter attention span.” For Kwon, this means preaching 25 to 35 minutes.

3. Know yourself.

Kwon also wisely encourages preachers to know themselves: “A sermon should also be attuned to the preacher’s *giftedness*. One of my preaching professors once said, ‘Some preach for forty-five minutes and it feels like fifteen; others preach for fifteen minutes and it feels like forty-five.’”

One time, I attended Charles Swindoll’s church in Frisco, Texas, and found myself absorbed in the sermon. I looked down at my watch in the middle and was shocked to discover that fifty minutes had gone by. I wouldn’t encourage preachers to preach

like he did that day. It wasn't a clear exposition of a text—just a lot of stories. Yet it occurred to me that a gifted communicator can talk for an hour, and people don't mind.

Yet most of us aren't so gifted. Keller observes, "It is certainly possible to regularly preach 40+ minutes if (a) you train the congregation's expectations . . . and (b) if you are a good enough speaker to maintain people's interest."

4. Aim for concision.

Let me model this point: most of your sermons could use an editor. Trust me. I'm an editor. I know. So many extraneous words and sentences could be cut, and nothing would be lost.

Kwon again: "It still takes a singular sort of self-awareness and a humble embrace of limits for a preacher to acknowledge that he'd be more effective when preaching *more concisely*."

5. Push your audience because more is more.

Few pastors or books on preaching mention this point, yet I would like to press on it for just a bit. We need to be sensitive to cultural realities, yes, but there's also a place to slowly push on our congregation's time horizons. To ask for more. To strengthen their powers of listening. To risk callousing their backsides. I've seen it done.

You've heard a brazen Reformed guy say it before, but to be that guy: They sit in movies for two hours. They watch baseball for three. Why not teach them to expect the Word of God for at least one?

For the last sixty years, churches have done the opposite. Since at least the days of Robert Schuller, we've trained churchgoers to expect humor, entertainment, and punch from the pulpit. We've not trained them to expect good exegesis. Instead, a good preacher is one part smiley news anchor, one part late-night talk show host, and one part Sunday School teacher.

Yet imagine an alternative world, where every gospel preacher offered sixty minutes of beefy exegesis and application. Where people expected that from churches just like they expected 60-minute lectures from a high school classroom. I dare say, they would become more capable of learning about the Bible and its applications to our lives.

And might they be stronger for it? After all, more Bible is, well, more Bible.

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