

Preaching & Teaching Jesus from Scripture

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Acts 29 Regional [NW]

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Preach the Word . . .

2 Timothy 4:2

I. Current Perspectives on Preaching

- *Dialogue over monologue* — removing the preacher in favor of a discussion leader of sorts who hosts a dialogue instead of presenting a monologue. This is simply the result of a low view of the Bible, church leadership, the gift of preaching/teaching and the postmodern addiction to complete egalitarianism in the home and church because of a disdain for authority. Practically, it is impossible to grow a church beyond maybe one hundred people in a room at one time with this format and encourages false teachers to rise up and lead many astray.
- *Expository preaching* — going through a book of the Bible verse by verse. While the Bible never commands or really even illustrates this method, some practical reasons make it popular:
 1. Because all Scripture is God-breathed and for our benefit, there is not a page of Scripture that is not helpful to our faith, so we should examine it all (2 Timothy 3:16–17).
 2. From church history we do know that influential preachers such as Justin Martyr preached expository sermons that went through books of the Bible line by line.
 3. It allows non-Christians and new Christians to follow along more easily than if the preaching jumps around the Bible.
 4. It doesn't allow the preacher to avoid difficult texts and issues.
 5. It helps teach the congregation to study the Bible for themselves.
 6. It helps show the importance of context in Scripture.
 7. It helps people to read and study along with the sermons each week.
 8. It makes it easier for people to refer back to what they have learned in Scripture.
 9. It forces the authority to reside in the text and not the teacher.
- *Textual preaching* — preaching on one section of Scripture without preaching it in the middle of the entire book as is done with expository preaching. Examples include a series on the "I AM" statements of Jesus from John's gospel, a series on songs of the incarnation sung in Luke's gospel at the birth of Jesus, or a series on elder qualifications from 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Some practical reasons also make this method popular:
 1. It shows the consistency of Scripture by linking sections together.
 2. It allows the preacher with a revolving church to hit the highlights of central truths every year.
 3. It allows the preacher to work in smaller chunks of four to eight weeks, providing flexibility to deal with issues as they arise.

4. It allows the preacher to work around the Christian calendar with mini-series on the incarnation around Christmas, crucifixion in the dark winter months, and resurrection around Easter.
- *Topical preaching* — using several texts from one or more books of the Bible or biblical authors to speak on an issue from many places in the Bible. Examples include a series I did on the atonement and one I am working on answering twelve common questions about Jesus. Scriptures are pulled from multiple places in the Bible for each sermon. As an aside, when this is done it is good to have the verses on a handout and/or on PowerPoint so that people do not get lost trying to keep up. While we do not have the full transcripts of the sermons preached in the Bible, the portions we do have tend to show that topical teaching was common. Some practical reasons this method are favorable include:
 1. The ability to trace a theme through multiple books of the Bible, showing the consistency of Scripture.
 2. The ability to preach with multiple perspectives and avoid the common error of reductionism
 3. The ability to address most thoroughly questions and controversies that arise.
 4. The ability to select the most appropriate verses from Scripture on a given topic.
 - *Seeker vs. believer* — there is an ongoing debate as to the purpose of the sermon and whether or not it should focus on converting the lost or maturing the saved. The apparent conflict is resolved by simply noting that both need to repent of sin and trust in Jesus to live a new life empowered by the Spirit and so a sermon can and should effectively communicate to both if the preacher is able to explain Christian jargon and such in order to speak the “tongue” of the hearer.
 - *Long sermons* — it is becoming more common with younger and more theologically reformed preachers to have longer sermons (e.g., forty-five minutes to one hour) than is common in most seeker and purpose-type evangelical churches (twenty to thirty minutes). The Bible does not speak to this issue directly. Upon occasion, though, we do see Jesus and Paul preaching very long sermons (Matthew 15:29–31; Acts 20:7–11). We do not have the transcripts of their sermons to see exactly what was said or how their arguments were arranged.

II. Reflections on the Narrative Preaching Trend

Cons:

- Mainline, liberal origins with a low view of Bible

- Can be a move away from propositional truth in favor of relativism and perspectivism as if transformation were possible without information.
- Can mean that the Bible is a story (not metanarrative story) and preaching is a story about the story.
- Can mean that books of the Bible that are not narrative (e.g., Proverbs is generally not narrative though it does include some interspersed narratives such as chapters five and seven) are not well taught because a form is imposed on a book without regard for its literary form.

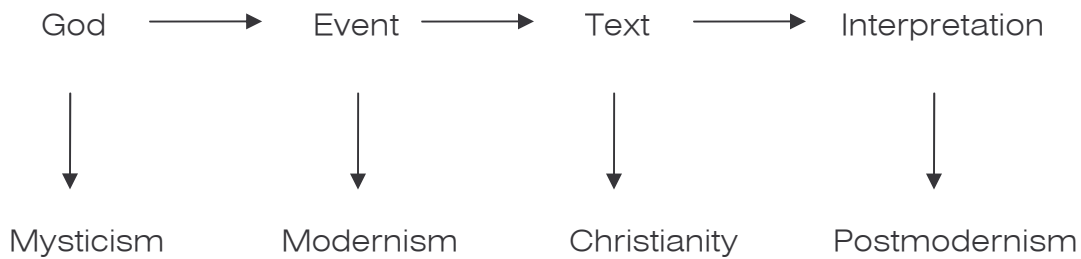
Pros:

- Can mean that a sermon can follow the storyline of a Bible story from one event to the next rather than a systematic theology approach of proposition to proposition.
- Can mean that the hearer is not given the thesis up front followed by its defense but rather is taken on a journey through the story of the text through conflict, tension, and eventual resolution. This is often more gripping and memorable.
- Can mean that the Christ-centered preaching approach inspired by Geerhardus Vos and the biblical theology stream of reformed theology promoted by Graeme Goldsworthy, Edmund Clowney, and Bryan Chapell (as opposed to the more strictly systematic stream of reformed theology) are applied.
- Can mean that the Bible is THE STORY (metanarrative) and that preaching always connects to THE STORY, which is the story of redemption, or the gospel. This means that every sermon needs to be explained in terms of where it fits in terms of creation, curse, covenant, Christ, church, and consummation. This does not mean that every sermon is a story, but rather that every sermon fits within THE STORY and the genre and style of biblical literature determines the format of the sermon. Some are narrative and some are not. This also allows us to start in a better place than systematic theology. For example, the five points of Calvinism start with the fall and human depravity and ignore the first two chapters of Genesis, where the story of the Bible begins.
- Can mean that not only is the Bible the metanarrative story that moves from creation to new creation, but that it has Jesus as its hero and centerpiece in both His incarnation *and* exaltation:
 - Matthew 5:17 *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*

- John 5:39 *You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me . . .*
- Luke 24:27 *. . . beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*
- Luke 24:44–45 *He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.*

III. Epistemological and Hermeneutical Implications on Preaching

Note: This graph is taken from my chapter in a forthcoming book, *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, edited by Robert Webber and co-authored in a debate format with Doug Pagitt, Karen Ward, Dan Kimball, and John Burke.



IV. Historical Lessons on Preaching

- Martin Luther — distinguishing law- from gospel-preaching to avoid moralism
- John Calvin — preaching for the transformation of a city
- Jonathan Edwards — preaching to inflame the affections and spark revival
- Puritans — meeting the objectives of the hearer
- Charles Haddon Spurgeon — preaching the images
- Geerhardus Vos — preaching Jesus

V. Five Biblical Lessons on Preaching

1. Christ-centered preaching is cross-centered (1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5).

¹⁸For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

²⁰Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²²Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

2. Christ-centered preaching humbles man and exalts Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5).

²⁶Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

3. The preacher must culturally appropriate his style (1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5).

^{2:1}When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ²For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

4. Christ-centered preachers speak as fathers (1 Corinthians 4:14–15).

¹⁴I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. ¹⁵Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.

5. Fatherly Christ-centered preaching aims for transformed lives (Colossians 1:24–29).

²⁴Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. ²⁵I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness— ²⁶the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. ²⁷To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

²⁸We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. ²⁹To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.

VI. Practical Suggestions for Preachers

1. **Labor in preaching and teaching.** Prayerfully choose a book of the Bible (and sometimes a thematic theological series) that bites you and plan on spending months, sometimes years, studying that book in preparation to preach it. A book like Genesis took me over 1,000 hours of work to study, write commentary, and preach.
2. **Pray and meditate over the text.** Continually pray for the Holy Spirit to teach you His Word as you are studying the Scripture. No amount of theological training can overcome the deficit of a preacher who is not led by the Holy Spirit to understand and proclaim the very words that He inspired.
3. **Struggle, and then preach the fight, not just the win.** As you study, wrestle with tough texts like Jacob wrestled Jesus. I find that preaching tough texts such as gender roles, the flood, hell, etc., are much like driving a car into a steep curve. If you hit the brakes in fear, you will lose control, but if you accelerate into the tough turns, gravity actually slingshots you through smoothly. In the pulpit, momentum and authority come through accelerating into tough texts in the study and then driving the church through them.
4. **Find the images.** As you study Scripture, steep in the verses/phrases/words/pictures that bite. Too often the principles of Scripture are preached when the images and word-pictures are far more impacting and memorable. For this reason, other movements have even co-opted the biblical images so that a dove now represents peace, not the Holy Spirit, and a rainbow represents gay rights, not the Flood, by which God killed people for sin (including sexual sin). I find that sermons are memorable if the images in the Scriptures can be drilled into the imaginations of people. Perhaps the master at this was Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who would not just describe a scene of Scripture, but actually put you in it through your imagination.
5. **Check the experts.** Only after you have spent considerable time in the naked text should you check your studies with trusted teachers to ensure you have not come to heretical conclusions. I try not to pick up the commentaries until I have had many months in the Scripture I am preaching to ensure I do not get lazy or simply rely on another man's walk with God. I will read it repeatedly in multiple translations and read every decent commentary from every theological persuasion I can find in order to examine the book from every angle.
6. **Move from theology to doxology and biography.** You must live what you learn, teach it to your family, and spend a lot of time repenting of sin and seeking to obey God's Word by the grace He provides. Much of my sermon is simply

explaining what the Scripture says, how that has changed my life, and how that is causing transformation in my family and those people with whom I live in community. In this way I hope to demonstrate to my church what it means to come under Scripture; by talking about my own sins and flaws, they see me struggling through Scripture and not just preaching my tidy answers at the end of my studies. Because of this my sermons are long, anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half.

VII. Five Sermon-Framing Questions

I find myself continually coming back to five questions which shape every one my sermons:

1. **What does Scripture say?**

To answer this we need to check translations, do our word studies, and find out exactly what words best convey the meaning of Scripture.

2. **What does Scripture mean?**

Here we need to interpret what is said, which requires commentaries, cultural background studies, etc. At this phase, John Glynn's *Commentary and Reference Survey* is a must-have for every preacher and teacher. He rates all of the best commentaries and other reference material on various books of the Bible and theological topics.

3. **Why do we resist this truth?**

Here we are assuming that people will not simply embrace God's truth but fight it with their thoughts and/or actions because they are sinners who, like Romans 1:18 says, suppress the truth. So, we attempt to predict their objections and resistance so that we can answer them and remove their resistance to get them to embrace God's truth for their life. This part of the sermon must be confrontational and often ends up in people walking out, standing up to argue, and sending in nasty emails, all of which indicates you've hit a nerve like God wants you to. The real fight begins at this point and a preacher needs to come with his hands up looking for an opening much like a boxer. The issue here is uncovering the idols that people have and breaking their resistance to the truth of the gospel. This is also accomplished by co-opting their cultural hopes and presenting the gospel as the only answer to their deepest longing.

4. **Why does this matter?**

We need to connect all that we have said to a missional purpose for our lives, families, church, and ultimately God's glory. Something may be true but if people do not find it to also be important, they tend not to act on it. On this point I like to connect Scripture to the character of God, nature of the gospel, our mission in our city, and the quality of our lives both individually and collectively as a city of God within our city.

5. How is Jesus the hero/savior?

The Bible is one story in which Jesus is the hero. Therefore, to properly teach/preach the Bible we have to continually lift Him up as the hero. Any sermon in which the focus is not on the person and work of Jesus will lack spiritual authority and power because the Holy Spirit will not bless the teaching of any hero other than Jesus.

VIII. Ten Cautions & Encouragements for Preachers

1. **Read the biographies of great preachers.** There are some good books on preaching such as Bryan Chapell's *Christ-Centered Preaching*, but in my mind the best tutor is the biographies of great preachers. In reading these we can learn about their family life, devotional life, study habits, etc. One book that is a good introduction to the Puritans, who elevated the pulpit to a thunderous art, is *Light and Heat: A Puritan View of the Pulpit*, written by Bruce Bickel. I am also a rabid fan of the reformed Baptist Charles Haddon Spurgeon and read any biography I can find on his life and ministry.
2. **Beware of the radio preachers.** As a new Christian I listened to many hours of Chuck Swindoll, Greg Laurie, Tony Evans, Billy Graham, John MacArthur and others and was blessed. However, when men preach for the radio they are preaching to the masses. Subsequently, they are not as likely to speak personally of themselves, their struggles, their families, and the specific issues in their church because they are preaching to America. Most pastors don't preach to the nation or world, but just to their flock who need to know their pastor, see what the Holy Spirit has been doing with the Bible in their life, and how the Bible is integrated into their daily life and relationships instead of vague and general illustrations and principles that are true but not specific to their community. Also, younger preachers can often listen to so many hours of a radio preacher that they end up parroting him rather than finding their own voice and style. For example, if I had a buck for every twenty-year-old Calvinist who sounds like he's channeling John Piper or every Calvary guy who sounds like Chuck Smith I could have a building as large as Joel Osteen's. The key is not to mimic a man, but to learn from him and honor him simply by preaching the same gospel.
3. **Beware of the sermons for sale.** Tragically, there is a growing trend for preachers to buy their sermons. The tragedy with this is that such sermons are often goofy. Furthermore, they do not require the preacher to get his time in Scripture and do not encourage any sort of theological instruction as they are general mass market sermons to fit everyone, everywhere and are therefore not missional or theological or, arguably, biblical. While it is not wrong to listen to other preachers and how they taught on a text or topic, it is unwise to simply preach someone else's work whether that is through plagiarism or the purchase of a sermon.

4. **Study the stand-up comics.** Stand-up comedy and preaching are the only two mediums I can think of in which someone walks onto a stage to talk for a long time to a large crowd. Dave Chappelle, Carlos Mencia, and Chris Rock are genius at capturing an audience using irony and sarcasm.
5. **Junk your notes and go with the Ghost . . . sometimes.** Some years ago I gave up trying to manuscript or outline my sermons. Now, I focus on knowing the Scriptures I am preaching, spending many hours in prayer, meditation, and repentance through the Scriptures, and being filled with the power of God the Ghost. Then, I just get up and, with a few scribbled notes in my margins, I preach as God leads and trust that God will direct my words and He always does. Sometimes I may use a brief outline, but I am not tied to any one way of being ready to preach and just do whatever seems like it will do the job best.
6. **Plug everything into your pulpit.** We have our children's ministry and small group ministry follow the teaching from the pulpit so that the whole church is studying and learning together to ensure focus and unity.
7. **Preach Jesus.** Jesus' name should be spoken repeatedly throughout a sermon so that it is clear which God you are speaking of. Jesus should be the hero of every sermon, the answer to every question, and the hope for every person. Jesus promised that if He is lifted up He would draw people and the key to church growth is the exaltation of Jesus.
8. **Learn from the feedback of your people without being defensive.** Certainly there are always neatniks and critics, but listening to the questions and disagreements of people always helps you improve.
9. **Give your sermons away.** Some years ago we started putting the sermons online as free MP3 downloads. Today, with podcasting and vodcasting, we are seeing millions of people download the sermons. Our vodcast has been as high as #1 on iTunes for Religion and Spirituality. The web is the new front door and many people will visit your church through your website long before they attend a church event. Also, many people like to catch up on past teachings, forward pertinent sermons to their friends, and listen to teaching while they drive to work, cook their meals, and weed their garden. By giving the sermon away for free, a preacher's ministry can continue for years into the future to a much broader audience than they have on a Sunday.
10. **After you've preached, let it go and sleep like a Calvinist.** Don't listen to your sermons over and over beating yourself up. Once you've preached a sermon, let it be a finished work and move on. Passion, courage, and boldness are keys to preaching that simply cannot exist in someone who is too analytical or critical of themselves, so lighten up, have fun, and let it fly in Jesus' name.