

04 Elevating Your
Expository Preaching
STEVEN J. LAWSON

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Through Reading
JOEL R. BEEKE

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Faithful Expositor
JOHN MACARTHUR

EXPOSITOR

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IMPROVE YOUR PREACHING



PREACHING • TEACHING • TRAINING



EXPOSITOR

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ALWAYS ADVANCING

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES



When I am invited to speak at a conference, I am often assigned a particular passage that the host desires for me to preach. I rarely preach from an old set of notes, because by God's grace I have grown in my exegetical and interpretive skills through the years.

As I prepare to deliver the message, my executive assistant will print out my sermon notes from the various times I have previously preached that passage. I will first look at my notes from when I was in my thirties, when I began preaching as pastor. The notes look embarrassingly thin. They are correct, but I handled the passage in a somewhat superfluous manner.

I then survey my notes from when I was in my forties, and they look a little better. There is more depth in my handling of the passage, as well as in applying it. I next look at my notes from when I was in my fifties. Some noticeable progress is evident.

Finally, I will review my notes in my present stage of ministry, in my sixties. The notes are much richer and fuller. My handling of the Scripture has greater precision. My application is far more penetrating. The introduction is

more interesting. And the conclusion is more challenging.

This continued growth is a healthy sign that should be true of every preacher. Over your years of ministry, an analysis of your preaching should demonstrate that you are advancing to the next level of excellence in the pulpit. Is this growth evidenced in your preaching?

This issue of *Expositor* is devoted to helping you advance to the next level of effectiveness in your preaching ministry. May you be always pressing forward in the development of your gifts and abilities for the glory of God. ♦

Blessings in Christ,

Steven J. Lawson



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EXPOSITOR
ONEPASSION



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ELEVATING *YOUR* EXPOSITORY PREACHING

Every effective preacher must be committed to excellence in the pulpit. Such a man will always be striving to advance his preaching abilities to the next level. After all, there is nothing spiritual about mediocrity. God deserves our very best efforts. No preacher should be fully content with where his pulpit ministry is. He must constantly press forward to improve his proclamation of the truth of Scripture. He should never be satisfied with where he is, because none of us has arrived. Instead, he must always be attempting to excel still more.


No preacher remains stationary in his pulpit abilities. Either he is advancing forward with greater precision and power—or he is regressing. There is no middle ground. Either he is growing in his gift of preaching—or he is reverting back. But no preacher remains in the same place. If a man thinks he has plateaued, he already has one foot on a slippery slope. The man who is self-satisfied with his preaching is surely sliding backward, whether he knows it or not.

In order to take positive steps to move forward in

developing your pulpit abilities, you will need far more than better techniques. Better exposition requires a greater strategic grasp of both the art and science of preaching. Any progress in your preaching begins with knowing God more deeply. It demands that you know the Bible more thoroughly. A greater excellence in your pulpit delivery necessitates an honest self-awareness of where you are in your personal development as a preacher. There is no easy path to pulpit excellence.

Any advancement in your pulpit skills also mandates a better grasp of the original biblical languages. It involves an enhanced use of grammar and syntax. This upward climb means gaining a greater mastery of the native language in which you preach. Any improvement in your preaching likewise requires that you are growing in the knowledge of human nature and the needs of those to whom you speak. There is no shortcut to this high standard.

This being so, how do you, as a preacher, become more effective in your pulpit ministry? How can you advance to the next level of exposition with precision and power?



When young men ask me how they can become better preachers, I always encourage them to sit under the best preaching they can find. I urge them to sit on the front row and glean as much as they can from a gifted man of God.

To answer these questions, we must acknowledge that every preacher is at a different stage of his personal development. Some men have more experience in preaching than others. Some are better trained in the Word than others. Yet others are more spiritually gifted than their peers. Different steps will be required by different preachers to progress to the next level. It all depends upon where they are in their journey and what is most needed to advance.

The following suggestions are general ways for every expositor to improve in his preaching:

Sit Under Great Preaching

Let us begin with this truism: learning to preach is more caught than it is taught. This same truth is relevant to advancing in your preaching ministry. The growth in your skill as a preacher may be significantly enhanced by sitting under and listening to other gifted preachers. By and large, careful observation of other effective preachers can be more valuable than being taught in a formal classroom setting.

When young men ask me how they can become better preachers, I always encourage them to sit under the best preaching they can find. I urge them to sit on the front row and glean as much as they can from a gifted man of God.

They will learn more in person than listening remotely through a podcast or watching on YouTube. If you are a young, aspiring preacher, you need to be in the building in order to best observe and experience Spirit-empowered preaching. Up close, you will feel the gravity and pathos of the man. Face to face, you will best observe both his non-verbal presence and his verbal presentation of the truth.

If you are already preaching, you should attend conferences where noted preachers are expounding the Word. You can greatly sharpen your skills by sitting under their preaching. When there are multiple speakers at a conference, it is helpful to compare one speaker to another. You can note their similarities and differences. You can study what makes one preacher's methods more effective than another's. Observe their body language. Note their gestures. Not everything you detect will be something you will incorporate into your preaching. You must still remain yourself. Nevertheless, there is still much to learn from other preachers.

Maybe you should drive a greater distance in order to sit under excellent preaching. Perhaps you should consider moving to another town to attend church with better preaching. What plans should you be making to attend a

conference where you can be under an array of strong expositors?

Listen to Great Preaching

You cannot always sit under noted preaching in person, but you can still learn by way of technology. You should avail yourself of audio and video recordings of sermons. Although not the same as being in person, these are still very helpful in learning to preach better. You should listen to the most competent and compelling preaching you can. When you listen to a gifted expositor, you immediately recognize excellence. You should tune your ear to both the substance and the sound of such preaching. Listen to both the tone and tempo of his effective delivery. Listen to the pace and pitch of good preaching. Listen to the man of God alternately speak faster and then slower, louder and then softer. These dynamics will eventually become ingrained in you.

These tonal aspects of effective preaching can be best learned by actually listening to a sermon. Although reading a sermon manuscript is helpful, it only tells half the story. Sermons are primarily meant to be heard, not read. It is not merely *what* the preacher says that matters, but *how* he says it. The manner of his delivery can either enhance the reception of his message—or hinder it. How he comes across to his listeners is vitally important to the success of his sermon. This is why you need to *listen* to effective preaching, because by it you learn the sound of what makes a sermon work effectively.

To whose preaching do you listen? How have they made a positive effect upon your preaching? To whom should you intentionally listen in order to learn more about good preaching?

Read Great Preaching

You can also learn much from reading and studying great preaching, especially that of former decades or centuries for which audio recordings are not available. Many men are visual learners and learn most from seeing something in print. In my seminary years, I did not learn how to construct and deliver a sermon exclusively from my class notes. My professor even wrote one of the most highly regarded textbooks on expository preaching. Instead, I actually learned more from reading the printed sermons of pulpit giants like Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and Charles Spurgeon. As my eye surveyed every page, I saw the role that each element of a sermon played—an introduction, the main headings, subheadings, cross references, extra-biblical quotations, illustrations, emphatic statements, and a gospel appeal.

Though I have now been preaching for fifty years, I still read the sermons of gifted preachers and learn much from them, especially from these old masters. I have read many of the sermons of Whitefield, the great English evangelist, and have greatly benefited from them. Obviously, we cannot hear his voice preach today. But we can read his messages and learn not only how to present the gospel, but also how to make an evangelistic appeal, calling sinners to faith in Jesus Christ. In print, I have observed from Whitefield what it is to plead with lost souls. I have studied his sermons and learned how to call the unconverted to repentance.

I have also learned from reading the sermons of men from our present time. Reading James Montgomery Boice, the late pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was like taking a master class in expository preaching. Before entering the pastorate, Boice had been an English major at Harvard University and served as the editor of *Christianity Today*. Among his many strengths, Boice exercised a commanding mastery of the English language. Boice possessed a remarkable skill in asking diagnostic questions that probed the minds and hearts of listeners. I also learned from him the value of using church history to support or illustrate a truth. Boice further emphasized the need to know and use systematic theology in the pulpit.

What preachers of the past are you reading? How have they enlarged your understanding of what preaching is? Who in the present has made a similar impact upon you?

Transcribe Great Preaching

Another important discipline is setting aside time to transcribe an expository sermon. Such an exercise allows the man of God to learn the nuts and bolts of a biblically based sermon. This kind of hands-on interaction with another man's sermon—a man who is uniquely gifted by God—yields a penetrating insight into what makes a sermon work. This practice is invaluable for most preachers of the Word. Such a ground zero involvement with the sermon is a critically important exercise in learning its essential components.

As a younger preacher, I regularly listened to the best preaching on cassette tapes. I would play ten seconds of the sermon, stop the tape, and write down verbatim what the preacher said. After pressing the play button for another ten seconds, I would stop it again and continue by writing his words. This laborious process would take many hours, but the routine was important, because I was learning the ebb and flow of an effective sermon. This practical involvement in breaking down a sermon accelerated my learning

concerning its various parts and how each aspect contributed to the whole.

As I wrote the transcript of a message, I intimately grasped the importance of sentence structure, transitional statements, main headings, subpoints, illustrations, applications, introductions, and conclusions—all simply by transcribing powerful sermons. I saw on paper what an introduction looked like. I saw where transitions were placed and how they were worded. I saw the carefully crafted aspects of personal application to the lives of the listeners. By taking notes, I could easily see before my eyes what great preaching looked like in my own handwriting. The process was as important as the product.

When is the last time you transcribed the sermon of a gifted preacher? Have you recently taken copious notes on the preaching of another expositor? Has doing so helped you learn the essence of an effective sermon?


Learn from Several Preachers

As you are inspired by other preachers, do not limit yourself to just one preacher. Do not become mesmerized with only one pulpit personality. Such a myopic focus will likely limit your preaching. Not only will you adopt one man's

strengths, but you will also assume his limitations and weaknesses. You may even adopt his imbalances, though unintentionally. Every preacher has blind spots. Therefore, it is important to have multiple voices influencing your preaching. Surround yourself with a multitude of positive examples as you learn to develop your own approach to preaching. Each man will help round you out and complete you in different ways.

In my early years of preaching, I first learned by sitting under two Baptist preachers who were my pastors: Adrian Rogers and W. A. Criswell. Their bold preaching put a fire in my bones that still burns to this day. I was then significantly influenced by two Presbyterian preachers: James Montgomery Boice and R. C. Sproul. What I gleaned from these brilliant preachers was theological and linguistic precision, both things I needed to better incorporate into my pulpit ministry. Finally, two Independent preachers have made their mark on me: S. Lewis Johnson and John MacArthur. From these six men, I learned what exegetically grounded, sequential exposition looks like when preaching through entire books in the Bible.

I needed the particular strengths of each of these six preachers to sharpen me. Though all of them had a solid



I am persuaded that most men never come close to reaching their full potential in the pulpit for the simple reason that they do not preach enough. George Whitefield said, “The more I preach, the better I preach.”

commitment to the Scripture, they were nevertheless different in their individual approaches and styles. Each of these men's fortes helped deepen and broaden various aspects of my preaching that needed assistance. Through their diverse influences, I became a more well-rounded preacher. Looking back, if I had been affected by only one of these men, I would have been limited in my development. I would have missed out on so much of what God wanted to build into my pulpit ministry.

Has there been a diverse circle of preachers who have influenced you over the years? Can you see the unique contribution each man has made? How could you expand the circle of influence by adding the perspective of one or two additional preachers?

Preach as Much as Possible

Ultimately, there is only one way to learn to preach, and that is to actually preach. You cannot learn how to swim at a library desk stacked with books. You have to jump into a swimming pool and experience the challenges of swimming in order to truly learn. The same is true of preaching. You can learn some things in a classroom, but the real education is on-the-job training in a pulpit. You have to stand before an open Bible and preach. Take the initiative to seek out preaching opportunities, even if they are just to a small group of believers. Learn to preach by seizing hold of opportunities to proclaim the Word.

I am persuaded that most men never come close to reaching their full potential in the pulpit for the simple reason that they do not preach enough. George Whitefield said, "The more I preach, the better I preach." This is a reality seen in all of life—just as the more you play golf, the better you become. The more you practice playing the piano, the better you will play. The same is true in preaching. Preach as often and regularly as you can. The old adage remains true: practice makes perfect. More preaching leads to better preparation for and delivery of the sermon.

When I was a young pastor, I began a regular pattern of preaching on Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, and Wednesday evenings every week. In addition, I taught a weekly men's Bible study and taught Sunday school for many of those years. That came to a total of five preparations per week for thirty-four years. Additional preaching included conferences and special meetings. The constant grind of that rigorous preaching routine kept me grounded in the Bible. It taught me how to use my study tools, such as commentaries and other resources. This discipline helped me learn how to arrange my preaching notes in order to best use them to deliver the sermon.

What steps should you take to preach more regularly?

What new opportunities can you find? What initiative do you need to take? How can you make yourself more available to preach? How can you let your readiness be known to others?

Preach in Different Settings

There is a certain predictability about preaching in only one particular place. You can easily fall into a one-dimensional rut. In order to overcome this, preach in as many different settings as you can. Each venue will give you different sightlines, pulpits, faces, and responses. This does not mean you must travel around the country to preach—just find different venues in your own church or city. Each setting will require a specific delivery from you and expand your abilities.

When I preach on Sunday mornings, I preach to the highest number of people. This is also when I preach to the most diverse assortment of people. The setting requires a certain level of preaching that is accessible to the broadest range of people. My Sunday evening sermon is preached to fewer people, but a more committed group. I can go deeper into the Word and drive home a challenging application more intensely. Wednesday evening is a yet smaller group that assembles and is often made up of older people and young parents. This preaching tends to be more devotional in tone. Sunday school and the men's Bible study are both more teaching oriented.

Again, each of these settings requires a different aspect of my preaching. While the core doctrine never changes, the trajectory and tone are altered to appropriately address the people in each of these unique gatherings. Each of these preaching opportunities brings out a specific nuance of my preaching that, in turn, helps me minister the Word in other situations. Again, this diversity of settings rounds me out as a preacher seeking excellence in my delivery.

How should you expand the number of different settings in which you preach or teach? How can you diversify these venues in which you minister the Word?

Preach the Whole Bible

The noted English preacher J. C. Ryle once said, "It takes a whole Bible to make a whole Christian." Likewise, it takes preaching the whole Bible to make a whole preacher. Our tendency as preachers is to camp out in our favorite section of Scripture—and those books that are easiest to expound. For most young preachers, this means the shorter epistles. These personal letters full of tightly worded truth are easier to preach for many, especially for new expositors. I certainly experienced this higher comfort level early in my ministry.

But in order to develop, you must expand to other genres of Scripture. Learning to preach narratives is an essential for every preacher. By preaching narratives, a *didactic* preacher becomes a more *dynamic* preacher. There is a certain energy built into preaching a story in the Scripture. There is passion that naturally flows from an inspired plot with its rising action, internal conflict, and character development. I learned to tap into this energy when I first preached the narrative portions of the four Gospel accounts. What further grew me was preaching through the book of Psalms. The exposition of these worship songs—from lament and praise psalms to trust and imprecatory psalms—ushered me into new dimensions of preaching.

As you preach different literary genres in different books of the Bible, you will grow immensely in your giftedness. Your vocabulary will deepen. Your passion will be ignited. Metaphors and analogies will more naturally pour from you. You will use figures of speech. Your preaching will no longer have the tone of a cognitive correspondent, but an impassioned poet. You will gain a better command of the language. You will better comfort broken hearts. You will improve in addressing the human condition. Your preaching will say the same basic truths in newer ways.

What parts of the Bible do you still need to preach? Do you have a tendency to gravitate to one part of the Scripture to the neglect of others? How should you pursue a more balanced approach?

Improve Your Vocabulary

The actual words that you use in your preaching make all the difference in the world. In its simplest form, preaching involves proclaiming the truth with specific words. If you use the right words, you will have better communication power at your disposal. Words on target clarify the accuracy of the message. A misspoken word taints the meaning of what God has said in His word. But the right word conveys the right meaning.

On the first day of my doctoral program under R. C. Sproul, our first assignment was to learn a list of three hundred English vocabulary words. He said we would be quizzed on them the next day. There was a method to this apparent madness. Dr. Sproul was teaching us the importance of the words with which we preach. I have never forgotten that assignment. It was everything that my English teachers and parents had tried to instill in me, but I had refused to listen. But when Dr. Sproul was selling it, I was buying it. This exercise began broadening my vocabulary, something I desperately needed, and sharpened my preaching.

The success of your ministry is largely dependent upon

your choice of words. Finding the best word—the *right* word—is critically important. Learn to opt for a specific word over a vague one. Choose a vivid word over a bland one. Use active words over passive ones. Employ a relevant word over an archaic one. The number one resource that I use in writing a sermon—other than my Bible, commentaries, and Greek and Hebrew language tools—is my thesaurus. If you are a preacher, words are your trade. Read books to expand your vocabulary. Do whatever it takes to add more words to your arsenal. Try to restrict the over-use of the same word in your preaching. Diversity of word choice helps to capture the listener's attention.

How can you improve your vocabulary? What intentional steps should you take to build your reservoir of synonyms?


Improve Your Grammar

As the preacher stands in the pulpit, grammar really does matter. Bad grammar draws attention to itself. It reflects poorly on the preacher and leaves a negative impression with a listener. A fly in the ointment can spoil the whole sermon. Improper grammar can cause people to focus upon your mistake rather than the truth you are preaching. In fact, it can even discredit you to your listeners. If you are wrong about grammar, people will wonder if you are wrong about the realities you are declaring.

When I graduated from seminary, my grammar was in need of serious improvement. In my first pastorate, some retired English teachers in my congregation would write down all my grammatical mistakes as I would preach. After the service, they would pull me aside in the lobby and hand me their list. It was like receiving a report card every Sunday. These interactions initially bothered me, but the Lord used them to prepare me for a lifetime of future ministry. Those English teachers were like God's sandpaper, smoothing out my rough edges and refining me. The use of better grammar enabled me to gain a hearing with some people that I would not have had otherwise.

Whether or not you have English teachers in your congregation, considering seeking outside help in this area. Ask your wife to correct you every time she hears you use incorrect grammar. She will bring you a world of good. Have a trusted friend make a list of grammatical mistakes in your preaching. There is no better way to extract bad grammar from your teaching than to hear from someone who loves you enough to tell you. Thank these people when they correct you. This is one of God's means of removing these flaws from your pulpit delivery.

Do you have someone who can give you feedback like this? Do you need to read a book on grammar and revisit



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the principles of its proper use? What are the most common grammar mistakes that you tend to make in speech or in writing?

Read, Write, Rewrite

If you are going to have a command of powerful sentences—with excellent cadence, diverse length, lead-in phraseology, dramatic emphasis, and word choice—there is no better method to learn this skill than to read great literature. I would urge you to spend time learning how masters of the English language communicate their thoughts. See how they use figures of speech and analogies. As you read masterful ways of communicating, a sharper use of words will permeate your preaching, even subconsciously.

You must learn to write a sermon manuscript, which involves drafting sentences. This necessitates that you learn to write well. It does not matter if anyone reads what you write. The mere fact that you are writing is a positive exercise for you. Learn to get your thoughts onto paper. Go through this diligent discipline—and often excruciating practice—of editing your own writing. Force yourself to


dig into your own sentences. By doing this, you will learn to speak with precision and ease. Writing breeds accuracy, and accuracy is the heartbeat of expository preaching.

As you write your sermon manuscript, compose it as though you can hear yourself preaching each word. Do not write your sermon notes as though you were submitting it to a seminary professor as a research project. Do not write as if you are turning in a theological journal article. Instead, write it as a sermon—with the dynamic energy of the spoken word. C. S. Lewis once said that great writers write with their ears, not with their eyes. Write your message as if you can hear yourself preaching it.

How should you broaden your reading in order to improve your writing and speaking? How can you develop your writing skills? What writing project could you begin in order to improve your use of words?

Read Books on Preaching and Preachers

As you read books about preaching, you will also sharpen your understanding of what skilled exposition looks like. Certain books will challenge your perspective about what



Most of all, effective preachers must be on fire for God. They must be consumed with a holy zeal for His absolute holiness. They must be absorbed with a burning passion for His glory.

The more you love God, the better you will preach His word. Do not let anything quench your fire for Him. Live in His word. Commune with Him in prayer. Adore His greatness. Confess all known sin. Be a quick repenter. Trust Him explicitly. Magnify His name. Extol His greatness. Long for His fellowship.

constitutes authentic preaching. Their pages will enlarge and deepen your thinking about what are the essential component parts of an expository sermon. These books will give you better insight into what makes your sermon work—and what hinders your message.

Read books like Martyn Lloyd-Jones's *Preaching and Preachers*. Originally given as a series of lectures at Westminster Theological Seminary, these addresses were edited by Lloyd-Jones and compiled into the individual chapters of this book. In my estimation, this is the one book you must read on the subject of preaching. Another recommended volume is *Preaching: How to Preach Biblically* by John MacArthur and the faculty at The Master's Seminary. This will enlighten you in some of the more technical aspects of exposition. J. W. Alexander's *Thoughts on Preaching* is as timeless as when he first wrote it in the nineteenth century. So also are *Evangelical Eloquence* by R. L. Dabney, *Between Two Worlds* by John Stott, and *Lectures to my Students* by Charles Spurgeon. Each of these books is a must-read for expositors.

I also urge you to read the biographies of great preachers. You will find them to be both instructional and inspiring. I strongly recommend the two-volume biography, *George Whitefield*, written by Arnold Dallimore. This book will make you want to preach. *The Forgotten Spurgeon* by Iain Murray will move you to stand strong when you preach in the face of opposition. The two-volume biography of Martin Lloyd-Jones by Iain Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones*, is also excellent. This book will elevate your view of the ministry, especially preaching. Reading books like these will make a world of difference in your pulpit ministry.

Will you take the time to read books on preaching? Will you glean from biographies on noted preachers that will enrich your understanding of the call to preach the Word?

Read about Church History

Before I attended seminary, I did not know much about church history. But in my classes, a whole new world opened up to me. I learned about the great preachers of the Reformation and the Puritan Age. I studied the powerful preachers of the Great Awakening, the Modern Missionary Movement, and the Victorian Era. These gifted men from the past became a part of my aspiration and drive. Though I was centuries removed, I experienced a bonding fellowship with them. I felt like I was being personally disciplined by them and becoming part of their legacy. Through the study of history, I learned that there is always a high price to pay—involving sacrifice and suffering—for every forward movement in the church.

Further, I encourage you to read about the martyrs, who

have given their lives for the advancement of the gospel. The accounts of these valiant men and women will implant a steel backbone in you as you preach. In one of his resolutions, Jonathan Edwards purposed to think much about the death of the martyrs. He understood the strength to be drawn from being focused upon these heroic figures. Read about the price that William Tyndale paid unto death for translating the Bible into English. Remember that enormous sacrifice when you stand to preach the Word. It is a blood-stained book that you hold in your hand.

Learn about other English Reformers such as Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley, who were burned at the same stake in Oxford for their unwavering allegiance to the true gospel. Hear Latimer say, while strapped to the stake, "Play the man, Master Ridley. We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England, as I trust shall never be put out." Read about Thomas Cranmer plunging his right hand into the flames first before being martyred, because in a moment of weakness he had previously signed a recanting of his confession of the gospel. These accounts will surely embolden you with deeper conviction and greater courage as you preach the Word.

In the front flyleaf of my preaching Bible, I have taped a picture of John Rogers. This man of God was burned at the stake February 4, 1555, as the first martyr burned by Queen Mary I of England—otherwise known as Bloody Mary. Roger's crime was helping finish Tyndale's work of translating the Bible into the English language. In his preaching, Rogers repudiated the mass and proclaimed the purity of salvation by grace alone. When you read church history, you begin to place everything into the right perspective. Any criticism I have ever had, any opposition I have endured, any rejection I have suffered has been, relatively speaking, little to nothing in comparison to what Christians over the centuries have faced. As you consider the martyrs, their heroic lives will embolden you when you step into the pulpit.

Will you become a student of church history? Will you introduce yourself to the lives of great preachers of the past? Will you be influenced by the examples of their remarkable lives?

Be Zealous for God

Most of all, effective preachers must be on fire for God. They must be consumed with a holy zeal for His absolute holiness. They must be absorbed with a burning passion for His glory. The more you love God, the better you will preach His word. Do not let anything quench your fire for Him. Live in His word. Commune with Him in prayer. Adore His greatness. Confess all known sin. Be a quick

repenter. Trust Him explicitly. Magnify His name. Extol His greatness. Long for His fellowship. Out of such a growing love for Him, you will find that your preaching will be taken to another level.

The empowering of the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential in preaching. In the book of Acts, whenever men were filled with the Spirit, they opened their mouths and spoke with boldness. Jesus had promised the first disciples, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and Samaria, and as far as the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). They were supernaturally energized to preach throughout the book of Acts (2:4; 4:8, 31; 6:3, 5; 7:55; 8:17; 9:17; 11:15; 13:9, 52). We, too, must be dominated by the indwelling Holy Spirit if we are to preach with spiritual power.

Ask God to rekindle your heart for Him with renewed passion. When Jesus appeared to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, He showed Himself to them in all the Scripture. The result was that they were ignited within their souls for Him: “Were not our hearts *burning* within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32, emphasis mine). Ask God to do *this work* in your heart. That is a prayer God will


answer, and it will elevate your preaching to new heights.

Building into Your Life

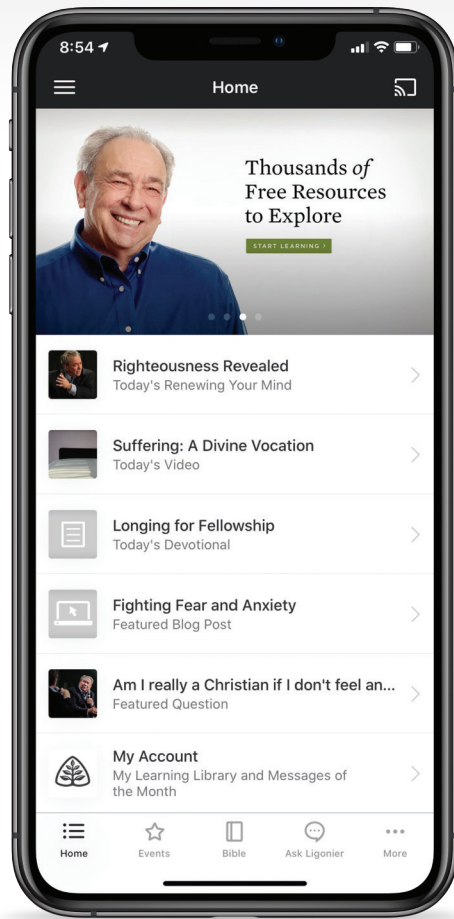
Many more steps could be listed to improve your preaching. This is not an exhaustive survey by any means. However, if you incorporate these practical steps, you will be well positioned to move forward. You may choose to only act upon one or two of these items. Or you may consider implementing all of them. However God leads you, your pulpit ministry will be headed in the right direction. I believe that this well-marked path will direct you to a higher level of effectiveness in your preaching.

No matter where you are in your pulpit ministry, you should always strive toward excellence. Whether you have been preaching for one year or for fifty years, always be reaching forward to make greater progress in your abilities. Such advancement requires hard work and maximum effort. If it were easy, every preacher would be dynamic and compelling. This endeavor requires our firm commitment if we are to make noticeable progress. It does not take much of a man to be a good preacher—just all there is of him.

May God help you to take significant steps forward “so that your progress may be evident to all” (1 Tim 4:15). ♦



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MOTIVATIONS

FOR THE

FAITHFUL

EXPOSITOR

For the biblical expositor, 2 Timothy 4:2 majestically stands out as sacred ground. It is precious territory for every pastor who, following in the footsteps of Paul, desires to faithfully proclaim the Word of God. In this single verse, the apostle defined the primary mandate for God-honoring church ministry, not only for Timothy, but for all who would come after him. The minister of the Gospel is called to “Preach the Word!”

As he penned this Spirit-inspired text, Paul knew he was about to die. The words of this verse stand at the beginning of the last chapter he would ever write. Alone in a bleak Roman dungeon, without even a cloak to keep himself warm (v. 13), the unwearied apostle issued one final charge—calling Timothy, and every minister after him, to herald the Scriptures without compromise. Paul understood what was at stake; the sacred baton of gospel stewardship was being passed to the next generation. That is

why he prefaced his exhortation to pastoral faithfulness with the strongest possible language:

I solemnly 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: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. (2 Tim 4:1–2)

The heart of that brief passage, *preach the Word*, summarizes biblical ministry in one central mandate.

In the verses surrounding 2 Timothy 4:2, Paul provided his protégé with much-needed motivation to stand firm and persevere to the end. For Timothy, the command was clear: *preach the Word*; and the calling was deadly serious: souls were at stake. In order to equip him for the task, Paul

gave Timothy four compelling reasons to persevere in ministry faithfulness. These motivations, found in 2 Timothy 3:1–4:4, are as applicable today as they were when the apostle wrote them nearly two millennia ago.

Motivation 1: Preach the Word Because of the Danger of the Seasons (2 Tim. 3:1–9)

In 2 Timothy 3:1, Paul warned Timothy “that in the last days difficult times will come.” Used here, the phrase “the last days” refers not merely to the end of the church age, but to the entirety of it, from the Day of Pentecost to the Parousia. Paul’s point is that, until the Lord comes back, the church will continually experience difficult times.

The phrase “difficult times” does not refer to specific points of chronological time, but rather to seasons or epochs of time. And the term “difficult” carries with it the meaning of being “savage” or “perilous.” Paul is expressing the reality that, throughout the church age, there will be seasons of time in which believers are savagely threatened. With his execution imminent, the apostle certainly knew a great deal about the difficulty that Christians might face. He also understood that Timothy was facing persecution and hostility; and that his young apprentice would be tempted by sins of cowardice and compromise. But that was exactly why Timothy needed to preach the Word. The looming threat made his ministry mandate all the more necessary and urgent.

In 2 Timothy 3:13, Paul wrote, “Evil men during these dangerous epochs will proceed from bad to worse.” Such men are “lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (3:2–4). They are externally religious, “holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power,” as they “enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (vv. 5–7). Being of a depraved mind, they are filled with sin, error, and destruction. They oppose sound doctrine and reject the faith.

Significantly, based on Paul’s description, it is clear that the greatest threat to the church comes not from hostile forces without, but from false teachers within. Like spiritual terrorists, they sneak into the church and leave a path of destruction in their wake. They are wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matt 7:15); and it is their treachery that makes the *difficult times* of the last days so perilous. The “difficult times” that Paul spoke of certainly characterize the contemporary situation. Yet, in the midst of this chaos and confusion,

faithful ministers are still required to carry out the very task that Paul gave to Timothy. In fact, the only solution for the church today is for pastors to diligently fulfill their God-given responsibility to *preach the Word*.

Motivation 2: Preach the Word Because of the Devotion of the Saints (3:10–14)

The faithful preacher is also motivated by his love and appreciation for those believers who have gone before him. Like a great cloud of witnesses, the examples of steadfast spiritual leaders from generations past spur the biblical expositor on toward greater commitment and ministry effectiveness.


In Paul’s case, he reminded Timothy of his own example, and urged him to follow suit. Thus, he says in 3:10–11, “Now you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, persecutions, sufferings. Such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured and out of them all the Lord rescued me!”

The gospel that Paul taught, Timothy was to continue preaching. The conduct, confidence, and Christ-likeness that marked the apostle’s ministry was likewise to characterize his son in the faith. Even the suffering that Paul endured, Timothy was to embrace as well. The young pastor was to stay the course and follow in the same path as his mentor. Thus Paul challenges Timothy with these words: “You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them” (v. 14).

In exhorting Timothy to hold fast and endure, Paul calls on his disciple to remember his own example. Timothy did not need a new strategy. He simply needed to follow the pattern of faithfulness he had observed in the man of God who had gone before him.

Paul understood that uniqueness and novelty in ministry is deadly. The right approach is not to reinvent the paradigm, but rather to follow in the well-worn paths of those who have come before. The faithful preacher appreciates his spiritual heritage—recognizing that he is linked to a long line of godly men from whom there can be no separation. Moreover, he understands that it is his responsibility, as part of the current generation of church history, to guard the truth that has been entrusted to him. Then, one day, he will pass it on to those who come after him (2:2).

The faithful preacher is motivated by the heritage left by prior generations of church history. And like the spiritual giants of past centuries, he is committed to the same ministry mandate as they were. It is a privilege to stand on their shoulders. But it is also a responsibility to carry on



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their legacy. Therefore, through both his life and his lips, he must *preach the Word*.

Motivation 3: Preach the Word

Because of the Dynamic of the Scriptures (3:15–17)

The faithful expositor is motivated, thirdly, by the nature of the Bible itself. He understands that Scripture is no ordinary book; it is the inspired revelation of God Himself. If the pastor desires to honor the Lord in his ministry, or to see the Holy Spirit's work unhindered in the lives of his people, he has no other alternative than to preach the Word faithfully.

Timothy had experienced the power of God's Word from a young age. Paul reminded him of that reality with these words: "From childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (3:15). It was clear to Timothy where the power and authority in ministry lay.

The apostle appealed to Timothy's past, essentially asking, "Why would you do anything other than preach the Word when you know, from your own personal testimony, that it alone is the wisdom that leads to salvation?" When the mission is to present the message of salvation in all its

Spirit-empowered fullness, the only option is to faithfully proclaim the truth of God's Word.

Having already appealed to Timothy's upbringing, Paul reinforced his point by emphasizing the Bible's true nature and dynamic effectiveness: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (3:16–17). This sacred book is "inspired by God," or more literally, *God-breathed*. And, as these verses indicate, it is not only powerful to save (v. 15), but also to sanctify.

With such a comprehensive work of both salvation and sanctification available through the power of the Scriptures, why would anyone be tempted to preach anything else? The pastor who cares about the spiritual growth of his people must make God and His Word the centerpiece of his ministry. In order to do that, he must *preach the Word*.


Motivation 4: Preach the Word Because of the Demand of the Sovereign (4:1–2)

Up to this point, Paul has prefaced his command to preach by warning Timothy about the dangerous seasons that will

come and by pointing to his own example as well as to the supernatural power of Scripture. But in 4:1, the apostle escalated his exhortation to an even greater level. Invoking God Himself, Paul expressed the seriousness of the situation in explicit terms: "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead and do so by His appearing in His Kingdom."

Those piercing words should strike holy fear into the heart of every preacher. They stand as the apex of Paul's previous statements and should serve as the most compelling motivation in the life of the expositor.

Timothy's call to preach came not simply from Paul, but from the Sovereign King by whom he was commissioned and before whom he would one day give an account. Jesus Christ is the one who will judge the faithfulness of His ministers. As men of God, they are under holy scrutiny from the Lord Himself. This is nowhere made clearer than in Revelation 1:14, where Christ is portrayed as surveying His church with penetrating eyes of fire. Those who are called to preach are under inescapable divine observation (cf. Prov 15:3). There is no relief from His gaze, no hiding from His evaluation (cf. Ps 139:7–12).



Timothy's call to preach came not simply from Paul, but from the Sovereign King by whom he was commissioned and before whom he would one day give an account. Jesus Christ is the one who will judge the faithfulness of His ministers.

The motivations that drove Paul and Timothy ought to compel the current generation of preachers and teachers. God is still delivering His divine mandate to faithful men: *preach the Word.*

The most dominant force in the preacher's life and ministry is the realization that he will one day give an account to God (cf. Jas 3:1; 2 Cor 5:10). Serious ministry is motivated by that weighty reality. Popularity with people, recognition from peers, winsomeness in the pulpit—these are not the standards of success. God's opinion is the only one that ultimately matters. And His measure of success is *faithfulness* (cf. Matt 25:21, 23). Knowing this, the biblical expositor is driven to carefully, clearly, and consistently *preach the Word*.

Faithful to the End

Paul was under no delusions that the commission would be easy for Timothy, nor for the faithful men coming after him. It had not been easy for Paul. Yet, in spite of the many trials he faced, the apostle had remained true to the end. As a result, he could say, "I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (4:6–7). In this, his last appeal to Timothy, he invited the young pastor to likewise run the race with endurance (cf. Heb 12:1–2).

But Paul went to his grave not knowing how the story would end for Timothy. He had to trust that the Lord would preserve him. Would Timothy remain faithful to the end?

Church history provides a later glimpse into Timothy's

legacy of faithfulness. According to *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*,

Timothy was the celebrated disciple of St. Paul, and bishop of Ephesus, where he zealously governed the Church until a.d. 97. At this period, as the pagans were about to celebrate a feast called Catagogion, Timothy, meeting the procession, severely reproved them for their ridiculous idolatry, which so exasperated the people that they fell upon him with their clubs, and beat him in so dreadful a manner that he expired of the bruises two days after.

To his dying day, Timothy courageously confronted the culture around him with the truth of the gospel. That unwavering commitment cost him his life. Like Paul, he was martyred for his faithfulness.

At the end of Timothy's life, he too was able to look back on a ministry that had been devoted to honoring Christ through the preaching of His Word. In the same way that Timothy had received a legacy of faithfulness, he passed it on to the next generation of Christian leaders. Bible expositors today, though removed by many centuries, are the recipients of that faithful heritage. The motivations that drove Paul and Timothy ought to compel the current generation of preachers and teachers. God is still delivering His divine mandate to faithful men: *preach the Word.* ♦





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IMPROVE *YOUR* PREACHING THROUGH READING

If you went to visit the shop of an old carpenter, you would no doubt find yourself surrounded by tools for measuring, cutting, shaping, and finishing wood. Some tools would be very simple, and others very expensive. The carpenter might show you a well-worn hammer that he has used daily for decades; it is now an extension of his hand. On the wall you might spy some unusual instrument, and then hear him explain that he uses that tool only once a year, but when the time comes, it is invaluable. You realize that over the years the carpenter has invested a small fortune in tools, for they are critical to his life's work.

Preachers are craftsmen of words, and they need tools. The preacher's tools are his books. Over the years, if he is able, he will develop a significant library. The selection, purchase, and use of books is an essential part of his life's work. Therefore, the preacher's library merits careful consideration and substantial investment.

There is nothing inherently worldly about pastors buying and reading books. If there were, I for one would be terribly guilty as charged. I am almost embarrassed to admit that I have collected a library of some 30,000 titles over more than half a century, since I was nine years old. Not that I have read all of them by any means. A library is to be used by a minister as just that—a library—so that he has helpful sources to turn to for every biblical and practical subject he is called upon to address.

Reading books is part of a minister's calling. Over the years, a faithful minister of the Word will grow to love reading sound books as an important "means of grace" for his own mind and soul. A young man I interviewed fifteen years ago as an applicant for Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary told me, "I feel called to the ministry, but I hate reading, so I want to get through seminary quickly, reading as few books as possible." I told him that I appreciated



It is important to know that, as a general rule, great preachers of the past were avid readers. They viewed the reading of sound biblical literature as the backbone of their sermon preparation, often commenting that their sermons took decades to prepare because behind each one was a lifetime of reading.

his honesty but that I hoped that his time with us in the seminary would result in his realizing how little he knew and move him to study more and to come to deeply appreciate sound biblical literature. Happily, that's exactly what happened. After he graduated with high honors from our seminary, he went on to get his Ph.D., and today is the president of a seminary with a wide-ranging ministry throughout Africa. Now he complains that he can't find enough time to read!

Studying books can and must be a spiritual exercise. Some of the best moments of my life have been when the Holy Spirit moved me through reading, interspersed with praying, to have fellowship with the Father and the Son. As Benjamin Warfield wrote, "Sometimes we hear it said that ten minutes on your knees will give you a truer, deeper,

more operative knowledge of God than ten hours over your books. 'What!' is the appropriate response, 'than ten hours over your books, on your knees?' Why should you turn from God when you turn to your books, or feel that you must turn from your books in order to turn to God?"

In this brief article, I offer some personal advice on how to read for a lifetime of growth in grace and fruitfulness, and then, specifically, how to use good books in sermon preparation.

How to Read for a Lifetime of Growth

First, it is important to know that, as a general rule, great preachers of the past were avid readers. They viewed the reading of sound biblical literature as the backbone of their sermon preparation, often commenting that their sermons

took decades to prepare because behind each one was a lifetime of reading. When Paul was preparing to die as a martyr, he made two requests of Timothy (2 Tim 4:13). First, he asked for a cloak (winter was coming, v. 21). Second, he asked Timothy to bring “the books, but especially the parchments.” Even to his last days, the apostle remained a reader. Spurgeon regularly read at least one if not two or three books a week. A lifetime of reading for your own growth is foundational for great preaching.

Read Regularly

While you must not neglect your duties in administration, leadership, and personal pastoral care, you must also not allow such things to consume your time to such an extent that you have no time for reading. Do not become like Martha, so busy serving Christ that you have no time to be like Mary, sitting at Jesus’ feet to listen to Him (Luke 10:38–42). Here are some practical guidelines to maintain good reading habits:

1. Guard your daily devotions. In addition to reading the Scriptures each day, spend at least ten minutes a day reading material that edifies your mind and soul. Personally, I have found the Puritans to be the best group of writers in this regard. They have it all: clarity of thought, depth of exegesis, experiential discrimination, practical and heartfelt applications—all grounded in the Word.

2. Block out time to study for every sermon and teaching occasion. Preachers vary here considerably, but typically about one third of my average length of sermon preparation time, which ranges from ten to twenty hours, is given to reading.

3. Be a perpetual student of sound doctrine. Read more about a doctrine that especially interests you. For example, if you want to marinate your mind and soul more in the saving work of Christ, read John Flavel’s *Fountain of Life* (Works, vol. 1). If you want to grow in holiness, read Walter Marshall’s *Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*.

4. Work through major books by classic Reformed theologians. Focus on one author for a while as a theological mentor. Outstanding examples are William Perkins, John Owen, Thomas Goodwin, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

5. Relax with a book that feeds your soul, such as *The Bruised Reed* by Richard Sibbes; *Faith Seeking Assurance* by Anthony Burgess; and *Precious Remedies against Satan’s Devices* by Thomas Brooks.

Read Wisely

1. Read the Bible first, most, and last. “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be

ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15).

2. Return often to the Reformed confessions and catechisms. They are succinct sources of pastoral wisdom on a host of issues, carefully formulated by the best of theologians and approved by the church for centuries.

3. Read more old than new. The Reformers and Puritans have a biblical and spiritual depth in their writings that is seldom matched today. George Whitefield wrote of the Puritans, “Though dead, by their writings they yet speak: a peculiar unction attends them to this very hour.” Whitefield predicted that Puritan writings would be read until the end of time due to their scriptural truth. Spurgeon agreed, saying, “In these [writings] they do live forever. Modern interpreters have not superseded them, nor will they altogether be superseded to the end of time.”

I would suggest that for every hundred pages you read from books published after 1800, read two hundred pages from books published before 1800. Martin Luther said that most of his best friends were dead—they were the authors of his library books! What great “friends” I have in Theodore Beza (presently I am reading with much profit a great old book [1587!] of his on the first three chapters of the Song of Solomon); Samuel Rutherford (reading his *Letters* has often led me closer to Christ), Wilhelmus à Brakel (his practical applications at the end of each chapter of his great classic, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, have greatly helped me shepherd my own soul as well as the souls of others), and J. C. Ryle (his profound simplicity has, I trust, made me a more sincere Christian and a simpler preacher).

4. Pause to think and write. Don’t just plow through a book with your mind half-asleep. Stop periodically to think, interact, underline (in pencil), or jot a note—i.e., take “ownership” of the books you read. As Paul said to Timothy, “Meditate upon these things” (1 Tim 4:15).

5. Read what you find useful, and a bit more. Don’t feel obligated to read a whole book. Look for the marrow. But then keep reading, to get context and avoid misunderstanding.

6. Choose carefully the authors that you read. Avoid unsound books. As John Trapp said, “Be careful what books you read, for as water tastes of the soil it runs through, so does the soul taste of the authors that a man reads.”

Read Experientially

1. Pray before, while, and after you read. The best reading, as the Puritans taught us, runs through a continual cycle of reading, meditation, and prayer. Meditation, they said, is the halfway house between reading and prayer.

2. Let your books study you. If the book is representing God’s truth, then allow it to speak to your soul. Take

time for self-examination. As Warfield asks, “Are you, by this constant contact with divine things, growing in holiness...? If not, you are hardening!”

3. Read to seek Christ and know Him better. Desire to see His glory in all that you study, to help you exercise more faith in Christ’s all-sufficiency for your needs. Make use of every book to lift up your love to Christ. Caleb Evans said that when a young man asked an older minister “how he might learn to be a good and useful preacher,” that minister replied, “You must learn to be a zealous lover of Christ.”

4. Find books that stir your heart to love, but not to puff up your mind to pride. A heart that is continuously being stirred up to love Christ more will bear fruit in the pulpit.

5. Do not glory in books; use books to glorify God. Cotton Mather said, “If you aim no higher nor better [in your studies] than to render yourself considerable, and make a figure among your fellow-mortals, or perhaps, to gain a comfortable subsistence in the world, all you do is wrong and mean [i.e., ‘low’], and vile, and the holy God looks down with abhorrence upon you.”

How to Use Books in Sermon Preparation and Ministry

For sermon preparation, it is paramount to have good resources for the original languages, to make diligent use of lexicons and grammars, and to build a collection of the best commentaries and books of sermons. Though I can’t speak for other ministers here as our methods of sermon preparation differ widely, my habit in sermon preparation is to move from the original languages and word studies to commentaries, and from commentaries to printed sermons. I suppose that I average two hours per sermon on doing word study and developing my main theme and points, and then another two hours reading and interacting with commentaries, tweaking my theme and points as I read, followed by the skimming of five to ten sermons on the text from our forefathers, which takes me another hour or two. Combined, this accounts for about fifty percent of my preparation time. The next six hours or so are then devoted to fleshing out my manuscript.

In reading commentaries, I try to use a mix between technical commentaries to help me understand languages and cultural settings (such as the NICOT/NICNT) and more popular commentaries that connect the text of Scripture to sound doctrine, love in the heart, and practical Christian living (such as Calvin, Henry, Poole, Hendriksen/Kistemaker). I also use three to five commentaries written on the particular book of the Bible my text is drawn from.

As for sermons, I go to PERT (Puritan Electronic Research Tool) on our Puritan Reformed Theological

Seminary website at <https://prts.edu/library/PERT/> to use our online Scripture index. Based on our 70,000+-volume library, this homiletical search engine is a great tool that provides every source and page number on a given text. Typically, dozens or even a few hundred sources will be readily available for each text. Most ministers will own a fair number of these sources, so this is a great tool to assist them in using their own library. From these sources, I select sermons from five to ten preachers that I know will be helpful in sermon preparation. I usually skim those sermons in about five minutes each, sometimes lingering longer if there are striking thoughts, ideas, illustrations, or applications. At times, I will read the entire sermon, if it is especially good.

I also refer frequently to the Reformed confessions and catechisms, and to expositions of them such as *Reformed Confessions Harmonized* (Beeke/Ferguson), *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries in English Translation* (4 vols.; Dennison); Johannes VanderKemp, *The Christian Entirely the Property of Christ* (Heidelberg Catechism); Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity* (Westminster Shorter Catechism); and Thomas Ridgely, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism*.

In addition to this, I suggest that you periodically read a book that increases your compassion and sharpens your skills as a shepherd of the flock and evangelist of the lost (such as Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*; William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying*; Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers and Preaching*; Jeremy Walker, *The Broken-Hearted Evangelist*). That will help you immensely both in the preparation of your sermon and in its delivery.

Then, too, don’t forget to read biography and history, such as Augustine’s *Confessions* or Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding*. Such books will lend color to your sermons. Find encouragement in the lives of godly men and women who persevered through suffering while remaining faithful.

To make your sermons contemporary, read about current issues. Whether it is defending Christianity against raging atheists, communicating about homosexuality with clarity and compassion, contending for the faith against “open theism,” or leading the church into ethnic integration, pastors have the responsibility to be informed about current problems facing the church.

For preaching and pastoral ministry, try to keep in mind, frequently consult, and promote in your church families some of the great Reformed theologians throughout the ages, such as:

- The Reformers: Martin Luther, John Calvin, Henry Bullinger

- The Puritans: Thomas Goodwin, John Owen, John Bunyan
- The Dutch Further Reformation: Willem Teelinck, Wilhelmus à Brakel, Herman Witsius
- The Scottish Presbyterians: Thomas Boston, Ebenezer, Ralph Erskine
- Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Writers: Jonathan Edwards, Archibald Alexander, Charles Spurgeon
- Contemporary Writers: R. C. Sproul, Sinclair Ferguson, Derek Thomas

Finally, get excited about good books. Promote them among your church members. Engage in book studies with young people and young adults. Help children build libraries. Give good books to your people. Provide them with a good church library and good books at discounted prices. Encourage them to read.


Conclusion: Get the Most Out of Your Books

The relationship between good preachers and good books is a close one. Thomas Goodwin (1600–1679) was a Puritan pastor and theologian of the first rank. He served as president of Magdalene College at Oxford from 1649 to 1660. After the restoration of the monarchy, Goodwin left

for London with much of his congregation. He continued his studies, avidly reading Augustine, John Calvin, William Ames, and other Reformed divines. Yet, as his son later recounted, “the Scriptures were what he most studied,” and to assist his meditations on the Word of God he consulted many good commentaries.

It was a terrible blow when the Great Fire of London swept through in 1666, destroying more than half of Goodwin’s books. He remarked that God had touched him in a very tender place, humbling him for loving his books too much. Yet he responded to this divine chastening with a discourse on James 1:2–4 (KJV), “My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.” In other words, he dealt with the loss of his books by publishing another book.

May the Lord teach us not to love books for their own sake, but to make diligent use of books out of an all-encompassing love for God and His Word, and love for our fellow human beings, aiming to do good to their souls. Strive to get the most out of your books, for your own mind and soul, and for the minds and souls of those to whom you preach the Word. By God’s grace and the help of the Holy Spirit, it will make you a much better preacher and pastor. ✦



May the Lord teach us not to love books for their own sake, but to make diligent use of books out of an all-encompassing love for God and His Word, and love for our fellow human beings, aiming to do good to their souls.



REFINING THE PREACHER

The key to an effective ministry lies in the preacher’s personal walk with the Lord. Preachers who are not personally progressing in holiness (Christlikeness, Rom 8:29) are what Jesus called “whitewashed tombs” (Matt 23:27). It is not so much ability and giftedness that the Lord blesses; it is sincerity, authenticity, and transparent godliness. A pastor-preacher with no “back doors” (to cite a favorite metaphor of John Calvin) is a blessing indeed. The old adage “what you see is what you get” should characterize every servant of the gospel.

There is an urgency about what I write. Almost monthly, I hear stories of those who have given up on “full-time” ministry. They are burned out and cannot carry on. Guilt-ridden and crippled, they try other vocations, often experiencing both relief from the stress and guilt at their inability to persevere. The redoubtable Charles Siméon, after a quarter-century of ministry in Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge, wrote in 1807 that after a sermon he would “feel more dead than alive.” Christopher Ash writes

candidly and most helpfully on this condition in his book *Zeal Without Burnout: Seven Keys to a Lifelong Ministry of Sustainable Sacrifice* (The Good Book Company, 2016). Another equally helpful treatment is by David Murray, *Reset: Living a Grace-Paced Life in a Burnout Culture* (Crossway, 2017). Included among the keys in Christopher Ash’s book are chapters on such things as the need for sleep, the role of friends, and Sabbath rests. Those who experience burnout deserve our sympathy and prayers, for theirs is a path they would never choose without the most intense pain and distress.

Others have given up on pursuing the real goal of ministry—the glory of God—because they have instead fallen into the sin of self-glorification. Like the Jewish opponents of Jesus in John 5, they live for the buzz of receiving glory from one another (John 5:44), despite Jesus’ clear objective to “not receive glory from people” (John 5:41). His was the path of self-denial, “empty[ing] himself” (Phil 2:7) and taking the form of a servant. In our world of celebrity

preachers, we are often hoodwinked into concluding that blessing chiefly attends those who have the biggest churches and the most published books or the most Facebook friends or Twitter followers. But that is horribly distorted and shamefully crippling to the quiet but faithful preacher whose ministry radically shapes lives and rekindles vitality in a community of tens rather than thousands.

Preachers are not immune to the lust for recognition and importance. Whether they preach in a robe behind a marble pulpit or use a Perspex podium with the freedom to pace back and forth, preachers experience many moments when they are the center of attention. People hang on their words as though their lives depended on it—for their lives *do* depend on it! A speaker's insight into Scripture and the "control" over people's behavior it suggests can be a powerful drug. It is one of the reasons why a degree of maturity is required for those in ministry, not "a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil" (1 Tim 3:6, ESV). Pride, so Augustine suggested, is of the essence of sin. It is essentially self-seeking and vain-glorious—and preachers are not immune to its allurements. Addiction to this drug is deadly.

Walking worthy of the gospel is therefore a calling that requires effort and concentration. Is it ever the right thing to draw attention to oneself in ministry? Several considerations suggest that there are times when looking to oneself is exactly what we need to do.

Looking after Number One

Few scenes are more expressive of Paul's heart for ministry, and those who engage in it, than his charge to the Ephesian elders at Miletus. Fearful that they would not see each other again, he exhorted them (with tears), "[p]ay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). Those involved in pastoral care were to take heed of *themselves* first of all. The verb (*prosechō*) is an interesting one. The ESV translates the same verb in 1 Timothy 3:8 (a warning about alcohol abuse) as "addicted." As bizarre as it might sound to modern ears, Paul is exhorting the Ephesian elders to be addicted to themselves—there are occasions when, ethically speaking, looking after number one is the right thing to do!

It stands to reason, of course, that someone whose task is to exhort others to a life of godliness in response to the gospel of grace should himself reflect that holiness. To do otherwise would be hypocrisy, as Jesus warned: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful,

but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matt 23:27–28). The mask of feigned godliness and the impiety of public pretense cannot withstand the scrutiny of God's all-seeing, all-knowing examination of our hearts as ministers of the gospel. There is no hoodwinking the Almighty as to gossamer holiness on our part.

The author of Hebrews exhorts, "[s]trive . . . for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12:14). The exhortation is a general one, valid for every Christian, but its demand is especially needful for those whose lives are spent proclaiming the gospel.

The Right to be Heard

The Bible insists that "leaders" deserve respect. Hebrews is explicit on the matter: "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith . . . [o]bey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you" (13:17). But this demand for submission is not without qualification. Heretics deserve no respect and are to be shunned: "As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned" (Titus 3:10–11; cf. Rom 16:17; 2 Pet 3:17). The phrase "stirs up division" is an attempt to translate the Greek word *hairesitikos*, though the association of the term "heretic" with unorthodox theology is of later origin. In view here is not bad theology so much as bad character. The preacher Paul has in mind is predisposed to contentiousness, always seeking to divide.

The point here is that preachers and teachers cannot demand respect—a hearing, if you like—without any qualification. There must be a resonant godliness that accompanies what they say, and even precedes it. Consider the oft-cited sayings of Robert Murray M'Cheyne, the nineteenth-century minister of St. Peter's, Dundee in Scotland, who died shortly before his thirtieth birthday.

"A man is what he is on his knees before God, and nothing more."

"Study universal holiness of life. Your whole usefulness depends on this, for your sermons last but an hour or two; your life preaches all the week. If Satan can only make a covetous minister a lover of praise,

The failure is not so much what lies secretly hidden in private life; the failure lies in the very acts of holiness itself.

of pleasure, of good eating, he has ruined your ministry. Give yourself to prayer, and get your texts, your thoughts, your words from God.”

“Lord, make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be.”

“The greatest need of my people is my personal holiness.”

These are very familiar quotations from a young man whose ministry barely lasted seven years. Each statement is a powerful call to Christ-likeness as our chief aim and concern. Without this holiness, the task of ministry is futile, and worse, destructive. Without godliness, we will sow the seeds of hypocrisy. As M’Cheyne also suggested, each time we enter a pulpit (or stand behind a podium, or pace frenetically up and down, gesticulating wildly for emphasis), a shadow is cast on the wall behind us that says, “this man is a clown, a charlatan, a pretender, an actor (the root meaning of “hypocrite”).”

Sin is never greater than at the point of greatest usefulness

If pride and vainglory are powerful combatants to faithful ministry, something far subtler also lurks to bring us down. The failure is not so much what lies secretly hidden in private life; the failure lies in the very acts of holiness itself. For in our most holy moments—in public prayer or preaching or counseling—sin lies on the very surface. It often stares at us while we engage in the task of ministry.

It is at one level utterly astonishing and unexpected that Isaiah utters his “woe is me” statement. Following the magnificent *Trisagion*—the three-fold utterance of God’s holiness in Isaiah 6—the prophet becomes excruciatingly

aware of his own personal sin and ungodliness.

“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (Isa 6:5)

Isaiah saw the Lord “high and lifted up and seated upon a throne.” He glimpsed the spectacular sovereignty and majesty of God. And the sight of it undid him.

From one point of view, Isaiah had the cleanest lips in Israel! He was a prophet, one anointed of the Lord to speak God’s Word in proclamation and prophecy. His life, by all accounts, seemed outwardly impeccable. Wasn’t he the greatest of all the prophets who had ever lived? And yet, at the point of his greatest usefulness—the use of his lips in declaring the Word of God—he utters his most intense conviction of shortcoming. It is here, in his mouth, that he feels his sin the most. It is not so much what he does in secret that offends him—and *that* most assuredly does offend him; it is what he is in public, at the point where others see and hear him, that offends him the most. Our greatest sins are not necessarily in the dark and unseen areas of our life. They are in the pulpit, when God’s Word is uttered without faith, His gospel handled without care, His Son described without passion, His promises uttered without joy, His threats expressed without conviction.

Who is equipped for such a task as ministry? The high calling of office in the church of Christ should make us nervous. At one point, the Lord told Jeremiah not to be “dismayed” at the thought of public ministry (Jer 1:17). The word (*chathath*) suggests something like “to be shattered, or filled with terror.” It is a feeling all preachers have had at some point in their ministry. Facing a hostile church or a tense meeting of the deacons or elders, preaching on

a topic that is counter-cultural (like, for instance, the issues of complementarity in male-female roles in marriage or the barring of women from the eldership)—these can make the strongest knees shake. And in these cases, the promise given to Jeremiah is welcome indeed: “And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls . . .” (Jer 1:18).

Or take Ezekiel, God’s “watchman” (Ezek 3:16–21). Failure to warn “the wicked” or “the righteous . . . [who] turns from his righteousness and commits injustice” (Ezek 3:20) brings guilt—“his blood I will require at your hands” (Ezek 3:18). This is a fearful responsibility. A failure to preach about hell—its reality and awfulness—is an act of cowardice and culpability. No preacher should fail to see the balance of Scripture, offering heaven for those who repent and trust in Jesus Christ, and warning of hell for those who refuse the gospel. And it is tempting, all too tempting, to be drawn toward emphasizing one more than the other. I have known preachers who never speak of hell, even though I am certain they believed in its existence. And I

have known preachers who seemed always to be angry and threatening, and I fear that something of their own personal struggles emerged in the pulpit in the guise of “faithfulness” to Scripture. Getting the balance right is difficult, and only a close familiarity with the Scriptures will ensure a clear and undivided path.


A servant

Returning to Isaiah and his vision in chapter 6, perhaps the most astonishing aspect of this vision is the task he was asked to perform. He must preach to deaf ears!

“Go, and say to this people:

‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’

Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,



No preacher should fail to see the balance of Scripture, offering heaven for those who repent and trust in Jesus Christ, and warning of hell for those who refuse the gospel. And it is tempting, all too tempting, to be drawn toward emphasizing one more than the other.

and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.” (Isa 6:9–10)

God commands Isaiah to preach a message that will harden the hearts of those who hear it. It is one thing to be asked to do a difficult task in expectation of great reward and gain (thousands of converts!); it is another to be asked to be faithful to a task that will reap only rebuttal and disdain. God calls all preachers to be *faithful*, and He calls some preachers to be faithful rather than *successful*, at least in the ways that humans define success.

As Paul reminds us in his general exhortation to all Christians in Ephesians 4:1, walking worthy of the calling we have received is costly. Compliance with “demand” and “law” should be viewed as a lapse into legalism, for all Scripture’s exhortations to holiness are gospel-based. We obey *because* we have been saved from any suggestion that obedience will save us. Our obedience is a response to grace received. It is a way of saying “thank you.”

But what does *ministerial* holiness look like?

An example to follow

I am frequently taken aback by Paul’s insistence that Christians he knew (and who knew him) follow his example. He writes to the Thessalonians saying that the gospel had come to them “in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” and adds “[y]ou know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake” (1 Thess 1:5). The power of the preached Word was in direct proportion to the character of those who proclaimed it. In the following chapter, he adds another reference to the same effect: “You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers” (1 Thess 2:10). Similarly, Paul exhorts Titus to “[s]how yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity” (Titus 2:7). Likewise, he exhorts young Timothy, “[k]eep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim 4:16).

Of all Paul’s exhortations to godliness in ministry, none are more startling than those he makes to the Corinthians:

“I urge you, then, be imitators of me” (1 Cor 4:16).

“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1).

These urgings to imitate the apostle appear counterintuitive. Our reflex is say, “Whatever you do, don’t follow my example! I’m a failure like everyone else.” Indeed, there are

those who seem to highlight a “celebratory failurism” so that the focus is entirely on the gospel. Paul approves the inclination. He cites a saying that was already circulating among early Christians: “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” (1 Tim 1:15). Whether or not the final statement was part of the saying or something Paul adds is unclear. In any case, Paul is drawing attention to his sin and thereby puts emphasis on the fact that Jesus *saves*—it is *all* of Him, from beginning to end. We contribute nothing. Even our faith is a gift of God, “not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:9). As C. H. Spurgeon said, “Our prayers have stains in them, our faith is mixed with unbelief, our repentance is not so tender as it should be, our communion is distant and interrupted. We cannot pray without sinning, and there is filth even in our tears.”

If all we do (and all the apostle does) is sinful, how can Paul ask his readers to follow his example? The answer seems to lie in Paul’s equal insistence on measureable, discernible, progressive sanctification as a mark of what the gospel produces in us. This line of thinking requires a little conjugation.

- Nothing we do can make us more justified than we already are in Christ. Forensically and legally, we (Christians in union with Jesus Christ) are righteous as Christ Himself is righteous. His spotless robe of obedience is credited to our account. When God looks at us, He sees the purity of His Son reflecting back. This is why Paul moves inexorably from justification to glorification in the “Golden Chain” (to cite what the Puritan, William Perkins called it) of Romans 8: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (vv. 29–30). Once God decides on a course of action, there is no stopping Him!
- All growth in sanctification is impossible apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Think of Philipians 2:12–13, where we are told to “work out our salvation,” but this working is God’s working in us. And there is little point in drawing attention to the synergy of God’s action and ours, as though a fair comparison is being made. What, after all, are our puny efforts compared to the actions and determination of a sovereign, omnipotent God?

- This indubitable fact that we have just mentioned—that God is at work in us accomplishing His purposes of grace and salvation—does not lessen the demand for effort on our part. Salvation is not a “let go and let God” affair. We must engage in purposeful work and sweat. We are to pursue it with effort and grit. We must entertain the idea that apart from it, we can drift away, slip our moorings (cf. Heb 2:1), and possibly discover that our profession of faith was a mere sham. There are those who professed much and fell away, unable to be restored again to repentance (Heb 6:6). We have known some, and the thought of it should make us tremble.
- Every act of obedience on our part is imperfect. This side of heaven, the “good” we would do is never good. “Nothing good dwells in me” (Rom 7:18–19).
- The gospel urges us to aim for the good—holiness which is Jesus-likeness. Our faith-union with Christ is “we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4).

These are points that all Christians who believe what the Bible says should agree upon. Some, however, recoil if the latter point is pressed a little further. Should Christians try to “please God,” or is this essentially legalistic? Paul answers the question simply when he tells the Corinthians that he made it his aim “to please” Christ (2 Cor 5:9). It is therefore appropriate to ask, is the degree of my holiness such that it would encourage others to follow?

The soil out of which powerful preaching grows is the godliness of the preacher. Preaching doesn’t merely “happen.” It is shaped by who we as preachers *are*—by the totality of who we are in public and private. Actors are different. They can be Mephistopheles or Hamlet on the stage or in a movie and convince us that they really are the person they portray. Gary Oldman won the Academy Award for Best Actor for his portrayal of Churchill in the 2017 movie *The Darkest Hour*. But he also portrayed James Gordon, the police commissioner of Gotham City, with equal credibility in the *Batman* trilogy. In real life, he is an entirely different person.

Preachers dare not be one thing in the pulpit and another in private. But such disparity does exist. At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns of those who possess gifts for ministry who are devoid of holiness (Matt 7:21–23). There have been, of course, examples of preachers whom the Lord has used to great effect, but who turned out to be scoundrels leading a double life. Why would the Lord use a hypocrite to further His kingdom? It is profoundly disturbing to contemplate and when exposed does great harm to the kingdom of God. It breeds

cynicism and distrust of other preachers and the gospel itself. This is a mystery. But it is also a fact. And we who preach and teach must face the awful possibility that great deeds may be accomplished in Jesus’ name, even though, at the end, Jesus will say, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matt 7:23). There will be preachers in hell. That thought should make us tremble.


This could not happen to me!

David was Israel’s greatest king. He was “a man after God’s own heart” because of his extraordinary devotion to the Lord (1 Sam 13:14). David was a poet, musician, and warrior—a Renaissance man. And for all that, he is also known as the greatest sinner in the Bible. His adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and the consequent cover-up that led to the killing of Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband, is wicked and shameful in the extreme. And the note that closes the chapter that tells the sordid story rings like a tolling bell: “the thing that David had done displeased the Lord” (2 Sam 11:27). The progression in David’s sin reveals a hardening of his heart. Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, David would not have repented and given us Psalm 51, which records the trajectory from despair to gratitude for gospel grace.

Of some significance in David’s fall is the fact that David was neglecting his duty as king. When his men were at war in the spring of the year, David remained in Jerusalem (2 Sam 11:1).

Duty! Yes, it is an appropriate word for “ministers of a new covenant” (2 Cor 3:6). Preachers and teachers of the gospel are under obligation to obey God’s commands. Was David’s infidelity the result of a belief that he was somehow invincible? Had David gained such a familiarity with grace that he believed he could skate on the thin ice of temptation and not fall through it? Was David suddenly tempted to believe that a little flirtatiousness wasn’t such a great sin and that he knew when to stop it? Or was David’s sinning the inevitable consequence of a pattern of laziness toward maintaining his relationship with the Lord, a laziness that sowed the seed of habit and a pattern of response? It certainly looks this way.

As James points out, there is a morphology to temptation: “each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (Jas 1:14–15). Temptation begins with desire. It is a thought, a fantasy, that unless checked inevitably grows and matures into a full-blown act. David’s sin probably began a long time before he first caught sight of Bathsheba bathing on a nearby rooftop. David was a long way past voyeurism.



Preachers dare not be one thing in the pulpit and another in private. But such disparity does exist. At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns of those who possess gifts for ministry who are devoid of holiness (Matt 7:21–23). There have been, of course, examples of preachers whom the Lord has used to great effect, but who turned out to be scoundrels leading a double life.

His mind was already dulled to the consequence of illicit sex. Inviting her to the palace would end in only one way.

The passage has “warning” written all over it. Those involved in ministry at the highest level should never presume “this could never happen to me.” No life is immune from temptation, and given the right circumstances—neglect of one’s devotional life, a flirtatious belief that we can stop the trajectory any moment we please—the best can fall. As the sixteenth-century Puritan John Bradford allegedly commented when seeing a group of prisoners pass by, “There go I but for the grace of God” (cf. 1 Cor 15:10).

Gospel ministry is an inestimable privilege. To spend

one’s days, even the worst of them, in a calling that coincides with our inclination is an opportunity not granted to all Christians. For many (Christians and unbelievers), work “under the sun” amounts to misery and fruitless toil (cf. Eccl 2:18). Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it this way: “What is the chief end of preaching? I like to think it is this: It is to give men and women a sense of God and his presence.” And if we are to do that—give men and women a sense of God and His presence—we will need to walk worthy, reflecting the beauty of the gospel that we proclaim. God give us grace to do so. ♦



ARE YOU PREACHING CHRIST?

Almost every Sunday for the past 35 years, in the wee hours of the morning a habitual fright has awakened this *practicing* pastor from his slumber: do I have a word from the Lord for His people? And before the alarm sounds, I take a step back to see if—at the end of a week’s preparation—I have some message from the Lord to convey to His people.

Yes, it is—and I think it should be—a weekly, jolting, petrifying thought.

Sometimes, I am helped in this quandary about improving my final sermon preparation by an old catechism. The Westminster Children’s Catechism summarizes the major roles (“offices”) of Christ as prophet, priest, and king. I reason that if those are accurate summaries and if we wish to improve our Christ-like preaching, then normal expository sermons will include some elements from that formula to allow us to preach Christ triply.

Maybe it will help all expositors—veterans and rookies alike—to join in a similar final review in order to ascertain the Christocentric focus of a sermon. Below is a short matrix—far from a panacea—to help preach Christ

in triplicate, along with three concluding reminders. If our goal is to hold forth Christ always, then it should hardly be objectionable to preach Christ triply when possible.

The first office of Christ is that of a prophet. In the Old Testament, the prophet was the mouthpiece of God—he was a medium through whom the mind of God was conveyed. The prophet did not speak for himself; nor, as 2 Peter 1 teaches, did the Word of the Lord arise from mythology, much less from the prophet’s own will or imagination. The prophet—and Christ our Lord perfectly exemplified this—was not speaking for himself, but he had a consciousness that he was speaking for his Superior, for the Lord of Hosts.

In your role as a preacher, do you realize that the precious minutes graciously given by your audience are not times to hear from you but to hear from the Lord through your lips? Our time in the pulpit, those thousands of hours when others sit listening, are not for us to display our wisdom (1 Cor 2:1) nor our comedy nor our impressive digestion of culture, art, movies, music, psychology, or poetry (1 Thess 2:3–5). No, our preaching is not to be with clever

words or suave rhetoric—rather, we are, following Christ’s first office, prophets of God. We are standing in for God, and we should never forget that. I am helped when I review at five o’clock in the morning, often with perspiration, to ask: is my sermon, albeit not inerrant, notwithstanding speaking *in loco Dei*, in place of God?

The Children’s Catechism elaborates in answering how Christ is a prophet as follows: “Because he teaches us the will of God.” Prophetic expository preaching follows Christ by teaching the will of God, his comprehensive will (Acts 20:27). Moreover, in a guide simple enough for toddlers, the Children’s Catechism asks, “Why do you need Jesus as your prophet?” and affirms, “Because I am ignorant.” All our listeners are “ignorant.” Do your sermons inform and seek to cure native ignorance? Do they bring a word from beyond our horizons, a message that is unrivaled, albeit simple, that unveils or opens the mind of God to your listeners? If not, maybe someone else should be in the pulpit.

In addition to fulfilling the office of prophet, which entails that expository preaching will be prophetic, Christ is our priest. A priest, of course, is an interceding mediator. How can an expository sermon accomplish mediation?

The Catechism helpfully elaborates on the meaning of this office. The answer to how Christ is a priest (#44) is: “Because he died for our sins and pleads with God for us.” If that is what our Intercessor does for us—dies vicariously in our place and pleads with God for us—should not our sermons return to those themes often? And should not priestly expository messages plead for us to be reconciled to God? After all, as our children learn, we need Christ as a priest “Because I am guilty.”

As we review our sermon notes weekly, we may fittingly ask: Does our preaching illuminate the need for redemption? Do we declare both that listeners’ deepest need (far more demanding of attention than their narcissistic “felt needs”) is to know their guilty state and to know how to be saved from that state by the One who died for us? And, as priestly expositors, do we convey to our listeners that we too identify with the ravages of sin, guilt, and weakness (cf. Heb 2:17–18)?

Thirdly, if Christ is king, how does that affect your preaching? Kings, of course, rarely speak directly to the masses. They normally deputize heralds and intermediaries. That is what a gospel ambassador is: a herald who represents a Sovereign, announcing the message of *Pantocrator* (Acts 4:24). It is not our news to edit; *it is an edict, not an editorial*—and thus comes with authority.

These sermons from regal expositors declare and proclaim. They are not designed for audience approval, as if given to a focus group or issued as an invitation to register

“like” or “dislike” on Facebook. Neither are the terms from the Sovereign up to the mouthpiece or the audience. Do you sense that your spoken message is given from the One who holds all authority in heaven and on earth? Does this not inspire holy boldness as well as humility and awe? Would our pulpits not be elevated, would churches not grow, would sanctification not advance if we returned more to the idea that we are court emissaries, unscrolling a decree from the Lord?

If I do not have some shred of this in my early morning fright time, I am provoked to get up, pray, study more, and find some. For the king’s subjects deserve His royal Word.

Again the Children’s Catechism is helpful. It asks, “How is Christ a king?” and answers that with “He rules and defends us.” Further, the companion payoff question, “Why do you need Christ as your king?” is answered with “because I am weak and helpless.” Those are our congregants: weak and beggarly people (not only the children) who desperately need an announcement from the king, telling them how He rules and defends them and how He meets them in their condition of weakness and neediness.

When Calvin expounds the Lord’s Prayer, he ties “Thy kingdom come” to preaching, praying for the removal of all hindrances to God’s proper reign. Said Calvin: “This is done partly by the preaching of the word, and partly by the secret power of the Spirit. It is his will to govern men by his word; but not as the bare voice, if the inward power of the Spirit be not added, does not pierce the hearts of men, both must be joined together, in order that the kingdom of God may be established. We therefore pray that God would exert his power, both by the Word and by the Spirit, that the whole world may willingly submit to him.” Dependence on the Word and Spirit together is greatly needed in ambassadorial expositions today.

Do our sermons convey these notes? The finest expositors in history did so. Moreover, I am fairly confident that if you wish to return to that matrix, your church will be rare; and those eager to receive prophetic, priestly, and kingly preaching will be most grateful.

Three final, short tips will aid the expositor who wishes to improve his prophetic, priestly, and regal expositions. To do so requires, first, a deep and abiding trust in the inerrancy of Scripture. We will never hit our target of preaching Christ triply if we do not cling to, and submit ourselves and our wisdom to, the full, unquestioned, and total truthfulness of Scripture. Preaching that honors the offices of Christ will not occur from the lips of those who doubt the truth and timelessness of the Bible.

Second, expositors must ask of themselves in a final review: am I expecting the Holy Spirit to work in and

After several decades, the prospect of appearing in a pulpit—even with years of study and a week for focused preparation—still scares me.

through His Word today? Or am I relying on something else? Do we believe that the Holy Spirit still works and that He is the Agent of change? Or do we look to programs, logic on fumes, fads, or our own charisma to effect change?

Protestant forebears regularly depended upon the Holy Spirit to enliven the Word in human hearts. While commenting on 1 Corinthians 1:17–20, Calvin described the Spirit of God as having “an eloquence of his own... [that] shines forth with a native luster peculiar to itself...” Preaching is an act of Spirit anointing; and Calvin was wise enough to distinguish between that kind of preaching and other human oratory.

The Reformer correctly saw Jesus’ preaching as starkly contrasting with that of the scribes, who “were false expounders of Scripture, [and thus] their doctrine was literal and dead, breathed nothing of the power of the Spirit, and was utterly destitute of majesty.” As Calvin expounds on Jesus’ early preaching ministry, he saw that “the power of the Spirit shone in the preaching of Christ” with great radiance.

The preaching ministry conveys “great majesty” as “if spoken from heaven.” This “treasure of heavenly wisdom” calls for “puny” men to respond with reverence to the Spirit speaking in the Scriptures. The office of anointed preaching, thought Calvin, is as necessary for the church as food and drink are for the body. This Spirit’s work is “most excellent” and “to be held in highest honor and esteem” (*Inst.* 4:3,3) among believers.

Thirdly and finally, we will need to look to Jesus’ own priority and practice of preaching. At Christ’s incarnation, there was *kerygma* from angels at Jesus’ birth; and the gospel narratives show preaching to be the ministry of first resort. When Jesus was baptized by the Holy Spirit, the first sermon of the Gospels was from the Father at this baptism.

Jesus preached in the local synagogue in Matthew 4, and believed that “the spirit of the Lord had anointed” Him. Jesus preached with unrivaled authority (Matt 7:27–29), and He sent His disciples to preach (Matthew 8–12). Their preaching was a stark contrast to the dead use of the Scriptures by the Pharisees, and in the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13), Jesus made it clear that our task is to disseminate the seeds that would bear fruition to eternal life. Jesus modeled this kind of preaching in His discourses, and He was preaching to the end (Matthew 24–25). His last earthly mandate was for His followers to teach all things that He had said, while making disciples and baptizing (Matt 28:18–20). Taking our cues for ministerial priorities from Jesus will yield steady improvement.

I, for one, hope to continue growing in preparing and delivering expository messages. That is why I emphasize that I am still a *practicing* pastor. There is no higher calling nor more challenging activity.

After several decades, the prospect of appearing in a pulpit—even with years of study and a week for focused preparation—still scares me. Some may wish to call me unliberated, or to castigate me as performance-driven, even to criticize me for not viewing myself as one of the king’s adopted children or deride me as a person who is in awe of the One we represent—but none of that matters. What matters is that we lift our hearts to heaven and seek the smile of the One we represent. A dose of the prophetic, a dash of priestly preaching, and an ounce of regal exposition is probably a good review before entering any pulpit.

Expository pastors can improve by reviewing the Children’s Catechetical targets as a “final exam” on our work each week. Preaching Christ triply, or in all His fullness, surely is worth this purposeful inspection. ♦

NEW LIFE IN CHRIST

by STEVEN J. LAWSON

What actually happens when you trust Christ for salvation?

The single most important event in a person's life is the new birth. Yet many Christians would be hard-pressed to describe exactly what it is, let alone what it means to the rest of their walk with God. What happens when we are born again? Does everything in our lives change immediately? Is it just a kind of spiritual do-over, a chance to get it right this time? What happens when we fail? Does it mean we weren't really born again to begin with?

With a pastor's heart and a professor's insight, Steven Lawson carefully examines the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus found in John 3 to uncover the nature of this spiritual rebirth. He shows you the necessity of the new birth, how God changes our hearts through it, and what follows after, from baptism and involvement in a local church to handling doubts and setbacks.

"Steve Lawson is a force of nature. His preaching and writing have touched tens of thousands of lives. Saturated with Scripture, contoured by sound biblical doctrine, and passionately written, this book is a gem. It will change the lives of those who read it."

DEREK W. H. THOMAS, senior minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia,
South Carolina; chancellor's professor, Reformed Theological Seminary;
teaching fellow, Ligonier Ministries

FOREWORD BY
SINCLAIR FERGUSON

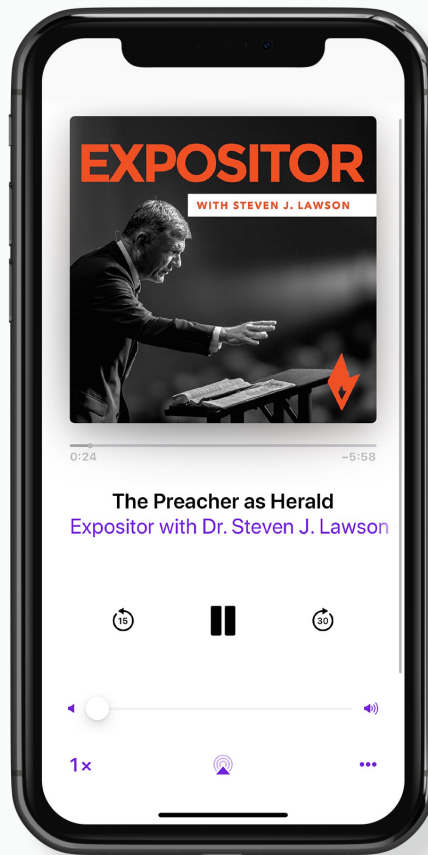
NEW LIFE

in

CHRIST

WHAT REALLY HAPPENS
WHEN YOU'RE BORN AGAIN AND
WHY IT MATTERS

STEVEN J. LAWSON



Join Dr. Lawson for a practical look into the life and ministry of the expositor.

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