

EXPOSITOR

A PUBLICATION OF
ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

SUMMER 2023

No. 43

the MARKS of EXPOSITORY PREACHING

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THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE EPHESIANS

Greeting

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1 To the saints who are in Ephesus, and ^care faithful ¹in Christ
Jesus: ²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus

Christ. ³Blessed be ⁴the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has

⁵blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing ⁶in the heavenly

places, ⁷even as he ⁸chose us in him ⁹before the foundation of the

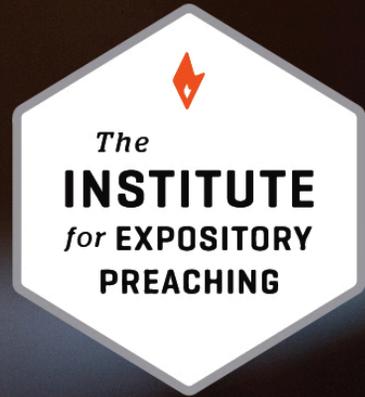
world, that we should be ¹⁰holy and blameless before him. In love

¹¹he predestined us ¹²for ¹³adoption as sons through Jesus Christ,

¹⁴according to the purpose of his will, ¹⁵to the praise of his glorious

grace, with which he has ¹⁶blessed us in ¹⁷the Beloved. ¹⁸In him we

have ¹⁹redemption ²⁰through his blood, ²¹the forgiveness of our tresp-



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THE MARKS OF TRUE EXPOSITION

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES



As a young man and teenager, I never sat under expository preaching. Not until I was a young adult did I ever hear true Bible preaching. In the years since, it has been my privilege to have been edified by gifted expositors. Each one has left an indelible impression upon me.

Some of these preachers were Baptists, including Adrian Rogers and W. A. Criswell. Others were Presbyterian, such as R. C. Sproul and James Montgomery Boice. Still others were independent, primarily S. Lewis Johnson and John MacArthur. Each of these men brought their own approach and personality into the pulpit. Some were more exegetical; others were evangelistically focused. But what these men had in common in their expository pulpit far outweighed their differences—and their influence remains with me.

Further, I have had the privilege of writing books on John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, John Calvin, William Tyndale, John Knox, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon, and Martin Lloyd-Jones. Each of these gifted men, mightily used by God, has left a significant mark upon me as I studied his preaching.

In this issue of *Expositor*, I summarize the necessary essentials for all Bible expositors, regardless of their denomination or affiliation. What these men hold in common are the vital distinctives of expository preaching.

As you study these features as laid out in this issue, may you continue to fine-tune your preaching to glorify our great God. ♦

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven J. Lawson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial 'S'.



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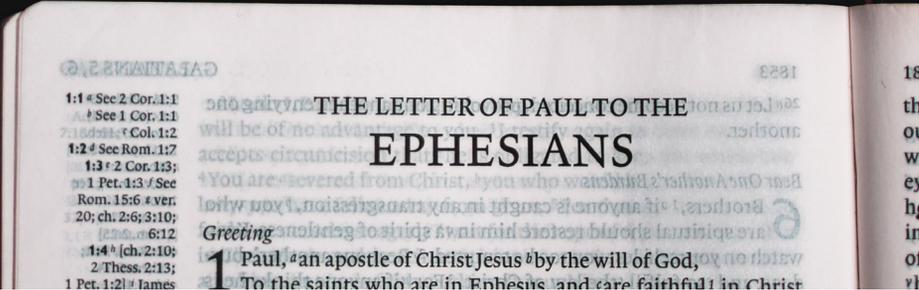
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Greeting

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 To the saints who are in Ephesus, and ^care faithful ¹in Christ
 Jesus: ^{2a} Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus
 Christ.

Spiritual Blessings in Christ

3e Blessed ^eof the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has
 blessed ^eus in Christ with every spiritual blessing ^ein the heavenly
 places, ^{4h}even as he ⁱchose us in him ^jbefore the foundation of the
 world, that we should be ^kholy and blameless before him. In love
^{5l}he predestined us ²for ^madoption as sons through Jesus Christ,
ⁿaccording to the purpose of his will, ^{6o}to the praise of his glorious
 grace, with which he has blessed ^eus in ^pthe Beloved. ^{7q}In him we
 have ^rredemption ^sthrough his blood, ^tthe forgiveness of our trespas-
 ses, ^uaccording to the riches of his grace, ⁸which he lavished upon
 us, in all wisdom and insight ^{9v}making known ³to us the mystery of
 his will, ⁿaccording to his purpose, which he ^wset forth in Christ ¹⁰as
 a plan for ^xthe fullness of time, ^yto unite all things in him, things in
 heaven and things on earth

Handwritten notes:
 glory → Christ → method
 Purpose → Plan → Grace → Blessing
 v95 → v90 → v6-7 → v6-3

THE DISTINGUISHING MARKS OF EXPOSITORY PREACHING

STEVEN J. LAWSON

It was the noted expositor John Stott, writing in *Between Two Worlds*, who stated, “All true Christian preaching is expository preaching.” The only legitimate form of authentic Christian preaching, Stott argues, is expository preaching. If he is correct—and I believe he is—then no preacher can afford to be misguided in his understanding of this pulpit ministry. If any man’s preaching fails to reach the high mark of expository preaching, it will have a devastating effect upon the spiritual vitality of his church and the spiritual state of his listeners.

In full agreement, the well-regarded theologian Walt Kaiser writes, “Expository preaching is not one of the optional luxuries of the pulpit.” The expository

approach to preaching is not one of many alternatives from which the preacher may choose as he carries out his pulpit ministry. Kaiser is saying that expository preaching is the truly authentic form of preaching that is taught in Scripture and finds acceptance with God.

In this article, we want to consider the distinguishing marks of this manner of preaching. These features serve like guardrails along the side of the road that keep the preacher directed in the narrow path he is to pursue. Each of these elements serves to identify the true nature of an expository pulpit. The spiritual power of any pulpit rests upon a clear understanding and decisive execution of these defining hallmarks. We will note eleven indicators

which provide a comprehensive understanding of what is involved in expository preaching.

TEXT-DRIVEN

Expository preaching is, first and foremost, driven by the biblical text. It is pulpit ministry that is rooted and grounded in Scripture. It is preaching that starts with a biblical passage and stays aligned with it throughout the sermon. It opens up the divinely authored text to show its proper meaning and to make known its relevance to the modern-day listeners. The expositor becomes a mouthpiece for a text of Scripture. He says what the text says, teaches what the text teaches, and requires what the text requires. The written Word of God is the alpha and omega, the first and the last, of his expository pulpit.

In Paul's final charge to young Timothy, he commanded him, "Preach the word" (2 Tim 4:2). According to the apostle, the preacher has nothing to say apart from the Word of God. This applies to every expositor who is called by God to stand behind the pulpit with an open Bible. True preaching is not reading a passage of Scripture but then departing from it, never to return again. Neither is it reading a passage and proceeding to wrap a series of stories around it. Nor is it reading a passage and playing fast and loose with its meaning, twisting it to say whatever the preacher wants to say.

Rather, expository preaching requires the preacher to resolve to preach the truth of the Bible. This commitment to the Word of God is rooted in his core conviction that the Scripture is the written Word of the living God. The expositor is deeply persuaded that the Bible is what it claims to be, the divinely inspired Word of God that has proceeded from His mouth. Therefore, the Scripture is inerrant, infallible, and authoritative. The preacher believes these sacred writings are all-sufficient, immutable, and invincible. Because this is true, he is firmly committed to preaching the Bible alone.

Tragically, though, most preachers have too little of the Bible in their preaching. Many of those who stand in pulpits need more Scripture saturation. Charles Haddon Spurgeon said, "I would rather speak five words out of this book than fifty thousand words of the philosophers. If we want revivals, we

must revive our reverence for the word of God. If we want conversions, we must put more of God's word into our sermons." To be an expositor, you must be fiercely committed to preaching the Word of God. The hallmark of your message must be "Thus says the Lord." Here is the true power of your preaching. God displays His power to save and sanctify in the "living and active" Word (Heb 4:12). This necessitates that the preacher be an avid student of the Word, one who is well trained to rightly handle its content (2 Tim 2:15) and accurately teach its truths.

GOD-EXALTING

The chief purpose of the Word of God is the magnification of the God of the Word. Therefore, the highest aim of the pulpit is to exalt the name of God. If all things are to be done for the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31), this surely includes preaching (1 Pet 4:12). We must be what John Piper calls "exaltational expositors"—constantly upholding God's greatness, unveiling His grandeur, and promoting His glory. The psalmist says, "Say among the nations, 'The LORD reigns'" (Ps 96:10). This must be our constant refrain every time we open the Bible to preach.

Peter demonstrated this kind of preaching on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14–40). He delivered arguably the most powerful sermon ever preached during the church age. The apostle was riveted upon God as he preached. He addressed what God would do in the last days in sending the Holy Spirit (vv. 17–21). Peter then announced that God performed miracles through His Son, Jesus Christ, to attest to His true identity (v. 22). He declared that God delivered over His Son according to His own predetermined plan (v. 23). But God raised Him from the grave (vv. 24–32) and exalted Him to His right hand (vv. 33–36). This message was, in every way, a God-exalting sermon.

Martin Lloyd-Jones had this goal squarely in mind when he asserted, "Preaching is first of all a proclamation of the being of God. ... Preaching worthy of the name starts with God and with a declaration concerning His being in power forever." Lloyd-Jones exhibited this kind of preaching throughout his pulpit ministry. J. I. Packer once commented concerning Lloyd-Jones's expository preaching, "I have



The chief purpose of the Word of God is the magnification of the God of the Word.

never known anyone whose speech communicated such a sense of the reality of God as did the Doctor.”

Therefore, expository preaching must be riveted upon God Himself. Whether He is standing in the spotlight of the text or seemingly in the shadows, there must be a central preoccupation with God in the sermon. From the pulpit, the focus must be continually drawn to the being and attributes of God—His holiness, sovereignty, righteousness, truth, power, love, grace, and wrath. The attention must be constantly brought to the activities of God—His reign, providence, salvation, and judgments.

This must be the lofty trajectory of our preaching. We are commissioned by heaven to give people the towering knowledge of the greatness of God. Our expositions must be vertical before they are horizontal, heavenly before they are earthly, eternal before they are temporal. In other words, the sermon must be God-centered before it is man-directed, transcendent before it is imminent. The expositor is to be continually leading the people of God to soar to the heights of heaven as he declares the Lord’s matchless greatness.

CHRIST-CENTERED

If preaching is God-centered, Jesus Christ, who is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), will be preeminent and prominent. All expository preaching must have as its center of gravity the person and

work of Christ. The Apostle Paul succinctly summarizes his preaching this way: “We preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor 1:23). He further states, “For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). More specifically, Paul states, “We proclaim Him” (Col 1:28), a direct reference to Christ (vv. 14–23, 27). The highest apex of the apostle’s preaching was the supreme person and saving work of Christ.

The entire Bible is about Jesus Christ. The Old Testament announces through prophecies and types that He is coming. The four Gospels declare that the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of God and Son of Man, has come to seek and to save that which is lost. The book of Acts records the preaching of the risen Christ, who is building His church. The epistles explain and defend the true Christ from the early heresies. The book of Revelation states that He is coming again to judge the earth, establish His kingdom, and reign forever. To preach any portion of Scripture means inevitably preaching Christ.

Every expositor must relentlessly expound the eternal deity, sinless humanity, and perfect life of Jesus Christ. There must be the proclamation of His substitutionary death, bodily resurrection, and present enthronement. There must be the sound teaching of His imminent return, future judgments, and eternal reign. Every preacher must present the Lord Jesus as the only Savior of sinners, whose

blood alone can wash away sin, whose righteousness alone can clothe the vilest transgressor of the law. Our sermons must be the lampstand to shine forth the true Light, Jesus Christ.

Spurgeon maintained:

If you leave out Christ, you have left the sun out of the day, and the moon out of the night, you have left the waters out of the sea, and the floods out of the river, you have left the harvest out of the year, the soul out of the body, you have left joy out of heaven, yea, you have robbed all of its all. There is no gospel worth thinking of, much less worth proclaiming . . . , if Jesus be forgotten. We must have Jesus as Alpha and Omega in all our ministries.

There is no more glorious subject for any expositor than preaching Christ. The Lord Jesus is living bread for empty souls (John 6:35), divine light for those living in darkness (John 8:12; 9:5), and the resurrection and the life for those who are spiritually dead (John 11:25–26). He is the door for those who would enter the kingdom (John 10:11) and the way, the truth, and the life for His followers to come to God (John 14:6). Further, He is the true vine who supplies all their needs (John 15:1–5). This is who the expositor must preach again and again—the

Lord of glory, Jesus Christ.

SPIRIT-EMPOWERED

Expository preaching is so demanding that it can only be carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit. This manner of pulpit ministry must never devolve into a dry lecture or merely disseminating information. It must never become a boring, lifeless message that simply presents historical facts and moral principles. An expository sermon must be delivered in the dynamic energy that only the Spirit can give. The spiritual force of the Spirit must capture the mind and heart of the preacher and compel his delivery with soul-penetrating power.

The Spirit must illuminate the mind of the expositor in his study. The psalmist prayed, “Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law” (Ps 119:18). Such must be the commitment of every preacher to rightly understand the Word of God. Jesus promised, “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you” (John 14:26). “But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). While having unique meaning for these first disciples, these words nevertheless apply to all believers down through the centuries. Especially do they have relevance for



Expository preaching is so demanding that it can only be carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Spirit-filled preachers.

Spurgeon said, “It is in our study work, when we are alone with the book before us, that we need the help of the Holy Spirit. ... He takes the things of Christ, and shows them under us... . By His light, all things are seen rightly. The Spirit inflames our passions for the truth that we are learning.” Spurgeon also remarked about the preparation to preach,

The Spirit of God ... can make you feel your subject till it thrills you, and you become depressed by it so as to be crushed into the earth, or elevated by it so as to be borne upon its eagle wings; making you feel, besides your subject, your object, till you yearn for the conversion of men, and for the uplifting of Christians to something nobler than they have known as yet.

At the same time, another feeling is with you, namely, an intense desire that God may be glorified for the truth which you are delivering.

The Holy Spirit also sharpens the words spoken by the preacher and drives them deeply into the hearts of his listeners. The Spirit of truth causes these words to have penetrating power into the inner person. Moreover, He emboldens our convictions and causes us to believe what we proclaim never more so than when we stand in the pulpit. The Spirit intensifies our tenacity to hold firmly to the truth as we preach. The Apostle Paul writes, “For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess 1:5). This “full conviction” references the unwavering beliefs of the preacher as he proclaims the Word.

The Spirit likewise enhances and enlarges the expositor’s compassion for those to whom he preaches. “The fruit of the Spirit is love” (Gal 5:22). As he preaches in the power of the Spirit, God gives supernatural desire for the good of those whom he addresses. The Spirit causes the preacher to long for their spiritual benefit as he ministers the Word to them.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes:

Preaching should be always under the Spirit—

His power and control ... If there is no power, it is not preaching. True preaching, after all, is God acting. It is not just a man uttering words; it is God using him. He is under the influence of the Holy Spirit ... It is an access of power. It is God giving power, and enabling, through the Spirit, to the preacher in order that he may do this work in a manner that lifts it up beyond the efforts and endeavors of man... The preacher is being used by the Spirit and becomes the channel through whom the Spirit works.

EXEGETICALLY GROUNDED

Lest anyone wrongly assume that because the Spirit gives the preacher what to say, he need not engage in serious preparation, remember that the preacher must also be a diligent student of the Word. All expository preaching recognizes the necessity of the man of God digging into the biblical passage. He must exegete the text and then rightly interpret it.

The Apostle Paul charges every preacher, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). This requires that every preacher must be persistent in his disciplined study of the Bible. He must be a “workman” who expends great energy, like a field laborer, in discovering the God-intended meaning of his passage of Scripture. A failure to dig into the text will result in being ashamed before the Lord. Through rigorous study, he must learn how to rightly handle the Word of truth, discerning the proper interpretation of Scripture.

This necessitates that the expositor be well established in sound exegesis as he studies his passage. He must be aware of the central theme and unfolding argument of the book in which his passage is found. He must know the larger and immediate context of his text. He must detect the keywords and note the syntactic structure of the sentence. He must do word studies in the original languages and parse the verbs. He must recognize the figures of speech, historical background, and cultural setting of his passage. All this and more is involved in being exegetically grounded in his biblical passage.

In order to determine the meaning of the text, the



preacher must be well acquainted with the laws of interpretation. This includes knowing the literal, historical, and grammatical approach to hermeneutics. He must know what the rest of the Bible teaches on the subject addressed in his text. He must understand the progressive revelation of the Scripture in the unfolding drama of redemption. This requires being able to access the original language with which the passage was written in order to examine the authorial intent.

Martin Luther writes, “Without [the original] languages, we could not have received the gospel. Languages are the scabbard that contains the sword of the Spirit; they are the case which contains priceless jewels of ancient thought If we neglect the [ancient] literature, we shall eventually lose the gospel.” Luther himself was converted by faith alone in Christ alone through studying the Bible in the original languages. For this German Reformer, this saving text was Romans 1:17.

THEOLOGICALLY PRECISE

In every passage of Scripture, sound doctrine is present. It is important that every expositor be well grounded in the main divisions of systematic theology: the Bible, God, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit, angels, Satan, and demons, man, sin, salvation, the church, and last things. Each passage of Scripture contains teaching in one or more of these ten major areas of doctrine.

Systematic theology pulls together all the biblical authors into one main body of theology. Biblical theology gives careful consideration to the doctrines

taught by each author, book, or Testament of Scripture. Historical theology addresses how each era of church history has interpreted each area of doctrine. This knowledge is necessary if an expositor is to efficiently teach the key doctrines found in his text.

Lloyd Jones claims that biblical preaching be based on a high view of theology. He writes:

What is preaching? It is theology on fire. And a theology which does not take fire, I maintain, is a defective theology; or at least the man’s understanding of it is defective. Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire.

Lloyd Jones continues:

Preaching must always be theological, always based on a theological foundation ... There is no type of theology that should be non-theological ... You cannot deal properly with repentance without dealing with the doctrine of man, the doctrine of the fall, the doctrine of sin and the wrath of God against sin. Then when you call a man to come to Christ and give themselves to him, how can they do so without knowing who he is, and on what grounds you invite them to come to him, and so on. In other words, it is all highly theological.

Therefore, the expositor must preach the whole counsel of God. No area of theology should be left unaddressed. Otherwise, there would be gaping holes in the biblical understanding of the listeners.

To neglect any area of doctrine would leave the congregation like a chair that had one or two legs removed. They would lose all sense of doctrinal balance, like a chair that cannot uphold anyone who sits in it. If any part of God's revelation is neglected, this will lead to spiritual imbalance in the listeners and cause weakness in their walk with the Lord.

LOGICALLY ORDERED

Expository preaching must be prepared and delivered with a well-ordered development of thought in its presentation. It must not be a mere random collection of exegetical gems. Neither should it devolve into a data dump of word studies, historical background, and cross-references that lacks noticeable structure and sequence of thought. One dominant thought should unite the message. In this sense, every sermon must be a one-point sermon, with one main idea to the message.

Though there is one central truth to the sermon, there should be various subordinate parts. The introduction prepares the listener for the main body of thought to be presented. This should be followed by the body of the message, divided clearly into sections, whether these headings are stated for the listener or not. The sermon should include transitions that connect these headings. Under each homiletical section, the preacher may provide subheadings or smaller units of thought to support the main heading.

Within the sermon, the expositor must show the practical relevance for daily life of the truth being delivered. Exhortation must follow application. The preacher must be a persuader who urges his listeners to pursue a course of action. He may include illustrations that help his congregation see the truth that is being presented. His goal must be to move the listener in the direction of the truth. His aim is not merely the distribution of information, but the transformation of lives. Finally, the sermon ends with a conclusion, toward which everything has built and will ultimately crescendo.

Lloyd-Jones stresses such logical order:

The essential characteristic of a sermon is that it has a definite form, and that it is this form that makes it a sermon. It is based upon exposition,

but it is this exposition turned or molded into a message which has this characteristic form. ...

I maintain that a sermon should have form in the sense that a musical symphony has form. A symphony always has form, it has its parts and its portions. The divisions are clear, and are recognized, and can be described; and yet a symphony is a whole.

Lloyd-Jones concludes:

One should always think of a sermon ... as comparable to a symphony. In other words, a sermon is not a near meandering through a number of verses; it is not a mere collection or series of excellent and true statements and remarks. ... What makes a sermon a sermon is that it has this particular "form" which differentiates it from everything else. ... You must arrange your headings and your divisions in such a way that point number one leads to point number two, and point number two leads to point number three, etc.. Each one should lead to the next, and work ultimately to a definite conclusion.

This is the task of the expositor. He must organize his subject matter into a well-structured presentation of the truth in his passage. The symmetry and form of the sermon are essentials for a well-prepared message.

PASSIONATELY DELIVERED

Expository preaching should always have the effect of igniting the hearts of the listeners. The kind of preaching that God blesses should wake up, fire up, lift up, and hold up the congregation. Great preaching should move the listeners and inspire them to live for the glory of God. Great preaching should motivate them to follow Christ and to obey the truth being expounded. This necessitates that the truth be delivered with energy, intensity, and urgency. Passion is indispensable to dynamic preaching.

Preaching with passion is contagious. Flames in the delivery will ignite the hearts of the listeners. Expository preaching should be soul-stirring and heart-lifting. It should be arresting, captivating, enthralling, and entrancing. It must come with a sense

of urgency and stress the immediacy of the moment. It must come with fervor and energy that conveys the importance of what is being taught. This kind of preaching should seek to inflame hearts, raise affections, inspire hope, and challenge wills.

Passion was evidenced in preaching in the Bible. Jonah “cried out” with a loud voice as he proclaimed the word of the Lord in Nineveh (Jon 3:4). John the Baptist was a voice “crying” in the wilderness (Matt 3:3). He was “burning” as he proclaimed the truth (John 5:35). Jesus burned with “zeal” (John 2:17) as He “cried out” in preaching (John 7:37). Peter “raised his voice and declared” the gospel on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14). Paul said we “preach” Christ, which indicates lifting his voice like a herald who stands before a public gathering. In each instance, the message was delivered with fiery passion, ignited by the Holy Spirit. The message delivered arose from the depth of the preacher’s soul.

Passion is conveyed from the pulpit in many ways. It resonates in the intensity of the voice, the tone of the delivery, and the pace of the words. It is conveyed in the focus of the eyes, the gesture of the hands, and the posture of the body. It is communicated in the repetition of the words, the choice of the expressions, and the placement of the sentence. It involves the pause before words, the raising of the voice, and the lowering of the voice. It may include the shedding of tears, the closing of eyes, and the smile of the mouth.

John Murray, esteemed professor and author, said, “If there is no passion, there is no preaching.” Without passion in the preacher, the sermon remains a mere lecture. He has converted his pulpit into a lectern and the worship center into a classroom. He has turned his sermon into a speech and the congregation into a student body. Passion in the pulpit is an absolute essential in all preaching. Otherwise, it falls short of the high mark intended by God.

BOLDLY DECLARED

Another essential mark of expository preaching is that the message must be boldly and courageously declared. The word *boldness* literally means “all speech.” It conveys the idea of speaking openly and freely. It means freedom of speech without reserve.

It means to speak daring words without ambiguity. Boldness means to speak the whole truth, regardless of what it may cost. It means to give a full disclosure of what must be said and to hold back nothing.

The biblical examples of this are numerous. The prophets of old spoke with such great boldness that it often cost them their lives. John the Baptist spoke openly without reserve, and his head was severed from his body. The Lord Jesus Christ spoke with extraordinary boldness, which inflamed his enemies with hatred and led to his brutal crucifixion. The apostles in the early church spoke out with the same boldness, and it resulted in their persecution, imprisonment, and martyrdom.

Throughout church history, the greatest preachers have been those who spoke frankly without compromising their message. Without fear of reprisals, the men who have been greatly used by God have addressed their hearers without censoring the full counsel of His Word. They have been courageous men who have announced the truth in their generation and often paid a great price for their boldness. John Hus was burned at the stake. William Tyndale was strangled by the neck. John Calvin was run out of town. The Marian Martyrs were set ablaze by Bloody Mary. And Jonathan Edwards was removed from his pastorate.

Martin Luther insisted that all preachers should speak up fearlessly, whatever the cost. He urged that they proclaim the Word without reservation. Concerning their boldness, he noted:

[He] should open his mouth vigorously and confidently, to preach the truth that has been entrusted to him. He should not be silent or mumble but should testify without being frightened or bashful. He should speak out candidly without regarding or sparing anyone, let it strike whomever or whatever it will. It is a great hindrance to a preacher if he looks around and worries about what people like or do not like to hear, or what might make him unpopular or bring harm or danger upon him. ... He should speak freely and fear no one, though he sees many kinds of people and faces. He should not hold a leaf in front of his mouth.

Spurgeon said the same: “My motto is, I yield to none. I preach what I like, when I like, and as I like.” Again, Spurgeon said: “I have not softened down the Bible to suit the carnal tastes of men. I have said damn where God has said damn. I have not sweetened it down.” This Prince of Preachers suffered greatly for this, but it was the necessary price he paid for proclaiming the truth for all to hear.

John Stott recognized the need the church has for such bold men in the pulpit:

There is an urgent need for courageous preachers in the pulpit of the world today. Neither men-pleasers nor time-servers ever make good creatures. We are called to the sacred task of biblical exposition, and commissioned to proclaim what God has said, not what human beings want to hear. Many modern church men suffer from a malady called itching ears, which induce[s] them to accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings. But we have no liberty to scratch their itch or pander to their likings.

PASTORALLY EDIFYING

The expository preacher is also one who builds up the lives of others as he expounds the Word of God (Eph 4:11–13). As a pastor, he must be in tune with the spiritual and emotional needs of his flock and know how to apply the Word to them for their good. He must be able to both cheer and challenge,

convict and correct. The Word of God is a sharp, two-edged sword that cuts both ways (Heb 4:12). It both tears down and builds up, uproots and plants, cuts and heals. Preaching the Word of God is designed to both comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

There are several biblical images that reveal this truth. The pastor must be a loving shepherd who feeds and leads his flock. He must guide them beside still waters and direct them into green pastures as he ministers the Word to them. As they sit under his preaching, this should be the soul-prospering place where they are most nurtured in their faith. A concerned shepherd must lead his flock as he goes before them. He is not a rancher who drives his people as though they are a herd of cattle. Rather than force-feeding them, he, for the most part, encourages and appeals to them to follow the truth.

The expositor must also be like a nursing mother who cares for her young children (1 Thess 2:7–8). There is no more tender picture of affection than a mother nursing her baby, feeding the child from her own breast. This is how the preacher must be with those entrusted to his care. He must be gentle, sacrificially giving of himself to feed them the milk of the Word and nurture their spiritual growth (1 Pet 1:25; 2:2).

At the same time, the expositor must be like an imploring father (1 Thess 2:11), speaking directly to his congregation as the situation requires it. He



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must speak with the authority of a disciplining father who sets the boundaries for what is acceptable behavior. He must, in turn, warn and admonish them that there are painful consequences to wrong decisions (Col 1:28). If they persist in disobedience, the Lord's discipline will be brought to bear upon them (Heb 12:5–11).

As he carries out his pastoral duties from the pulpit, he must be a humble servant of the Lord (1 Tim 4:6). He must not intimidate and lord over the lives of the flock (1 Pet 5:3). He must not be overbearing in his manner of speech. Instead, he must demonstrate the lowliness of mind needed by an effective preacher (John 13:12–15). He must be under the authority of the Word of God and lead by example, modeling his own message. He should be able to call his listeners to imitate his walk with the Lord (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Phil 3:17; 4:9).

EVANGELISTICALLY AIMED

All expositors are appointed by God to do the work of an evangelist in their pulpit ministry. Their preaching must be evangelistic if it is to meet the biblical standard. An expositor who is not an evangelist is a contradiction in terms. If he fails to be an evangelist in his preaching, he is not a true expositor. Because the gospel message runs through the entire Bible, anyone who preaches the Word must, by necessity, preach the gospel. The former inevitably leads to the latter.

This emphasis upon evangelistic preaching is found throughout the entire Bible. God Himself was the first evangelist in the Garden of Eden, as He preached the gospel (Gen 3:15). So were Enoch (Jude 14–15) and Noah (2 Pet 2:5) preachers of righteousness, each warning his generation to must escape the coming judgment. This clearcut evangelistic message was made known by the psalmist (Ps 1:1–6; 2:12) and Solomon (Prov 14:12; 16:25). The prophets likewise preached the gospel, as witnessed by Isaiah (Isa. 1:18; 55:1–12), Joel (Joel 2:32), and Jonah (Jon. 3:4–5).

At the beginning of the New Testament, John the Baptist called his unconverted hearers to repent and enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matt 3:2). Jesus preached the same message of repentance and faith

(Matt 4:17; Mark 1:14–15). He trained His disciples to do likewise: “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt 4:19). They were called to preach and capture the perishing souls of lost humanity. Jesus modeled this: “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt 7:13–14). He summoned their response to take the decisive step of saving faith.

Jesus pleaded, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). On another occasion, Jesus said, “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me” (Matt 16:24). At the end of his earthly days, Jesus charged his disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19). They were charged to preach and seek to win the souls of those who were lost. This mandated their preaching the gospel and summoning the unconverted to repent and become disciples.

Throughout the book of Acts, these first disciples carried out their Master's mandate to preach the gospel. In their preaching, they intentionally sought to win men and women to faith in Christ. They proclaimed Christ and called men and women to repent and believe in Him. This evangelistic outreach began on the day of Pentecost and continued throughout their initial ministries. When the apostle Paul came to the end of his life, he charged Timothy, “Preach the word . . . Do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim 4:2, 5). This commandment remains non-negotiable for every preacher to this present day.

Spurgeon embodied this requirement to preach with the intent to win souls to Christ. This London preacher said, “Soulwinning is the chief business of the Christian minister.” To fail at this point, he stressed, is to fall short of the standard for all preachers. Again, Spurgeon said, “I would rather be the means of saving a soul from death than be the greatest orator on earth.” For this gifted preacher, evangelistic preaching was at the head of his list. Spurgeon also stated, “Preach the gospel, the gates



Every preacher must determine to pursue the narrow path—the one less traveled.

of hell shake. Preach the gospel, prodigals return. Preach the gospel to every creature; it is the Master's mandate." This evangelistic emphasis he made was clear to all who heard him. Once more,

I received some years ago orders from my Master to stand at the foot of the cross until He comes. He has not come yet, but I mean to stand there till He does. ... Here, then, I stand at the foot of the cross and tell out the old, old story. ... It is of Christ who loved, and died, the substitute for sinners, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God.

These quotes by Spurgeon serve to stress the essential nature of preaching the gospel in expository preaching. What Jesus Christ modeled and mandated from His disciples, Spurgeon reinforced in his day. This evangelistic emphasis must be a priority for every expositor.

TRAVELING THE NARROW PATH

Every preacher must make a critical choice as he approaches his pulpit ministry. Two paths lay open before him. Many preachers travel the wide path. It is broad enough to accommodate any approach to preaching. It allows for a variety of ways to address a group of hearers, including a steady diet of worldly musings, entertaining stories, and captivating humor. Such so-called "preaching" appeals to

the fleshly desires and worldly ambitions of the listeners. This kind of message tickles ears and strokes egos, but it never confronts sin, nor rebukes pride. It presents an easy-believism and offers cheap grace.

This preaching of the broad path paves a fast track to eternal destruction. This approach may fill the building, but it never fills the pulpit. It is long on theatrics but short on theology. It appeals to the felt needs of the unconverted, but it never addresses their real need to be right with God. It makes the wrong diagnosis and prescribes the wrong remedy. Many preachers in our day travel this heavily trafficked broad road.

Every preacher must determine to pursue the narrow path—the one less traveled. It is the harder route to take, and there are fewer companions. Its message is more soul-searching and sin-confronting. It preaches the exclusivity of the crucified Christ as the only remedy for sin. It requires self-denial and cross bearing. But it leads to true conversions and sound discipleship. The expositor must choose to build his pulpit ministry with gold, silver, and precious stones, not wood, hay, and stubble. He must be willing to sacrifice temporal success for eternal gain. The distinguishing traits that have been laid out in this article mark the trusted path you must travel. May you discern wisely the road you will follow. ✦

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DELIVERING THE EXPOSITION

JOHN MACARTHUR

ver the years I have had a lot to say about preaching. Of course, I've always been an advocate of verse-by-verse biblical exposition. It's my delight through our seminary and annual Shepherds' Conferences to train preachers and help equip them with the tools they need to unpack the meaning of the text. My books and other writings are full of instructions and exhortations for preachers, all with one consistent theme: "Preach the word ... in season and out of season" (2 Tim 4:2).

Naturally, my emphasis has been weighted heavily toward the task of careful study and preparation. The *substance* of a sermon interests me far more than the preacher's *style*. That, of course, reflects the

Bible's own priorities. Scripture is emphatic about the need for diligent study and rightly handling the Word of truth (2 Tim 2:15), while it says little or nothing about the preacher's posture, gestures, or tone of voice.

Nevertheless, how a preacher delivers the message is by no means a trivial matter. It's possible to preach a perfectly sound sermon in such a tiresome and tedious way that the preacher actually undermines the very truth he is attempting to proclaim. A good sermon poorly preached can turn people away from the truth as quickly as a poor sermon skillfully preached.

There's a famous (possibly apocryphal) story about a time when Alexander MacLaren slipped in

unannounced to hear a young preacher. The younger man, unaware of MacLaren's presence, began by saying he had been too busy to prepare a fresh sermon for the evening, so he was going to preach one of Dr. MacLaren's. He read the message in such a droning monotone that afterward, MacLaren told him, "I don't mind if you preach my sermons, but if you're going to read them like that, please don't say they're mine."

Elders must be "able to teach" (1 Tim 3:2; 2 Tim 2:24). A lack of skill in public speaking disqualifies a man from pulpit ministry just as surely as theological ineptitude does. Anyone who makes God's Word seem dull and tiresome simply doesn't belong in the pulpit. Indeed, this is one of the major factors to consider when determining a man's call to preach: Can he deliver a sermon in a way that commands and holds the attention of an audience? Does he speak with such clarity, authority, and passion that people are edified by hearing the message? Or does he bore them and lull them to sleep? If it's the latter, the man is most likely not called to preach. He is certainly not *ready* to preach.

Preaching is like playing the piano in that the basic techniques can be learned and improved. But doing it with excellence requires God-given gifts, and such gifts are by no means universal. Not everyone can draw large audiences or preach as well as George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon, or Martyn Lloyd-Jones. (It's worth mentioning also that no preacher should be motivated by a desire for prestige or celebrity. None of the great preachers in church history whose influence has been profound and lasting craved fame or admiration in the first place. What they aspired to was faithfulness.)

However, anyone who is called to preach can learn to deliver the message more effectively by observing a few basic principles. I've already mentioned three of the most important ones: clarity, authority, and passion. Let's consider how those qualities are important in preaching.

CLARITY

Several factors bring clarity (or a lack thereof) to a sermon. The most obvious is the logical flow of the sermon itself. This starts, of course, in the

preparation stage, and it's related to the sermon's content, but the preacher's pace and rhythm can also contribute to (or detract from) the clarity of the message. Speak too rapidly and your audience will not be able to keep up. Speak too slowly and the listener's own train of thought will take him elsewhere. Punctuate your thoughts with long pauses and his mind will fill those gaps with wandering thoughts. Each of those mistakes will cause your hearers to tune out. Lose them for even a few seconds and you undermine the clarity of your own message.

Another major key to clarity is the ability to make yourself heard with precision. This may seem pretty basic, but it is evidently not an obvious enough point for many. I have heard more good sermons ruined by mumbled sentences, slurred-together syllables, and indistinct consonants than by any other combination of delivery-style faux pas. Every word in your sermon needs to be pronounced clearly, completely, and precisely. Listen closely to any news reader or professional announcer and notice how carefully they articulate every syllable. The best preachers do the same thing. Sloppy pronunciation won't motivate your hearers to listen more closely; it will encourage them to tune you out.

Similarly, it might seem obvious that public speakers need to speak up, but it is a common tendency of inexperienced speakers to do the opposite. Timidity causes the preacher to soften his tone, sometimes to the point of making him hard to understand. Ironically, this is a bigger problem today than it was in the years before electronic microphones. In the era of Spurgeon and before, preachers had to shout to be heard by large audiences. Spurgeon once preached to a crowd of twenty thousand in the Crystal Palace (a glass structure with the acoustics of a greenhouse rather than an orchestra hall). But people who stood on the fringe of that crowd testified that they were able to hear every word clearly. People say George Whitefield could be heard and clearly understood up to two miles away when he spoke in the open air. Microphones have eliminated the need for sermons to be delivered at superhuman volumes like that, but many preachers nevertheless need to be encouraged to speak up.

In all the elements of vocal style (volume, rhythm,



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tone, pitch, inflection, and so on) the key to keeping people's attention is *variety*. Monotony is the enemy of clarity. Other irritating vocal habits can likewise break your connection with the audience. It's a good idea to listen critically to recordings of your own sermons. We all sound differently from the way we think we sound inside our heads, and it can be a painful experience to hear ourselves the way others hear us. But a critical review of one's own delivery can be a helpful wake-up call, exposing bad mannerisms we didn't even know we had.

AUTHORITY

A second vital characteristic of good preaching is *authority*. Of course, the preacher has no intrinsic authority of his own, but insofar as he proclaims and explains the Word of God accurately, he is delivering a message that comes with God's own authority, and his style needs to reflect that fact.

This was, of course, the singular characteristic of Jesus' preaching that made His message so

compelling to people who heard: "He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matt 7:29). Matthew is pointing out that Jesus spoke with His own authority, whereas the scribes were constantly buttressing their teaching with citations from this or that rabbi or tradition. Jesus, in stark contrast, said things like, "You have heard that it was said ...But I say to you" (Matt 5:21-22; 27-28; 33-34; 38-39; 43-44).

Still, what made Jesus' authority so definitive *as a preacher* was the character of His life. When the chief priests and council were looking for an excuse to put Him to death, they couldn't even find a credible false witness (Matt 26:59-60).

A similar principle applies to every preacher. The Word of God is inherently authoritative, so any preacher who proclaims it clearly and accurately is giving an authoritative message. Indeed, the preacher's authority comes from the biblical mandate to proclaim the Word of God as an envoy, the King's own ambassador speaking with the King's personal

authority. “We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us” (2 Cor 5:20 ESV).

That’s true of every preacher, young or old. Consider Paul’s charge to Timothy:

Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep 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 4:12–16 ESV)

The clear implication is that no preacher can have true authority in his delivery unless his own character is consistent with his message. Indeed, until a man is tested and proven above reproach, he is

not ready to serve in any official capacity, much less stand in the pulpit and preach (1 Tim 3:1, 10). If the life of a preacher does not harmonize with his words, the resultant discord will drown out the inherent authority in the message, regardless of how well prepared and well delivered the sermon may be.

It is also possible to undermine the authority of the message with a weak style of delivery. Those scribes of Jesus’ time, for example, were part of a movement that began centuries before, in Nehemiah’s time. Their original goals were to preserve the record of Scripture meticulously; to teach its truths to the people of Judah; and thereby to halt that nation’s frequent apostasies. But gradually, over several generations, the scribes themselves eroded the people’s confidence in the authority of Scripture. They did this by incessantly citing human traditions and human authors as proofs of their doctrines rather than explaining Scripture with Scripture. Don’t make that error.

Some preachers are so fearful of sounding dogmatic that they never state anything definitively.



Genuine, heartfelt passion from the preacher will do far more than any visual aid to capture the attention of the congregation and help them remember the lesson.

Rather than stressing the fact that the Bible has one true meaning and seeking to teach their people what that is, they will review all the alternative interpretations before timidly introducing the view they believe is right, with a weak version of “It seems to me ...” I’ve heard preachers give five or more alternative interpretations of a passage without ever expressing an opinion on which view is right. That style of teaching is actually gaining popularity in these postmodern times, but it utterly lacks authority.

PASSION

Closely related to the idea of preaching with authority is the need to preach with genuine passion. Martyn Lloyd-Jones famously referred to preaching as “logic on fire.” He meant that good preaching must bring together *both* well-reasoned biblical content and intense passion. He wasn’t advocating passion *per se* (that is, the crass brand of raw agitation whose sole purpose is to stir a crowd into a mindless emotional high), but a real passion for the truth being proclaimed.

Genuine, heartfelt passion from the preacher will do far more than any visual aid to capture the attention of the congregation and help them remember the lesson. I often advise preachers: turn off

PowerPoint, stop with the fill-in-the-blank handout sheets, and proclaim the truth of God’s Word with sincerity and fervor, energized by the Holy Spirit.

Baptists used to refer to this as *unction*: a manner of speaking that manifests earnest emotion about the truth being proclaimed. Unfortunately, the word *unction* took on a derogatory connotation in the wake of the charismatic movement, because so many blatant charlatans employed artificial enthusiasm as a substitute for meaningful content in their messages. But genuine passion has nothing to do with showmanship and everything to do with transparency, integrity, and a genuine love for the truth.

The influence of the charismatic movement has also conditioned many Christians in our generation to assume that the only legitimate passions are giddy, whimsical, or even utterly irrational. That’s sheer folly. What may be most lacking in the church today is the polar opposite: a deep and thoughtful sobriety in the presence of God’s Word. God Himself commends such passion: “This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” (Isa 66:2 ESV). That is an especially vital passion for preachers to cultivate.

Let the truth set your heart ablaze, and the fire will be evident in your preaching. ✦





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BE A BETTER PREACHER

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

Listening to or reading the reflections of others on preaching is, for most preachers, inherently interesting and stimulating (whether positively or negatively). These reflections, then, are offered in the spirit of the Golden Rule, and only because the Editor is a long-standing friend!

Over forty years have passed since my first sermon preached in the context of a Sunday service. Four decades is a long time to have amassed occasions when going to the church door after preaching is the last thing one wants to do—even if one loves the congregation (sometimes precisely because one loves the congregation and therefore the sense of failure is all the greater!). How often have I had to

ask myself, “How is it possible to have done this thousands of times and still not do it properly?”

Yes, I know how to talk myself out of that mood! Everything from “It’s faithfulness, not skill, that really matters” and “How you feel has nothing to do with it!” to “Remember you’re sowing seed” or “It’s ultimately the Lord who preaches the Word into people’s hearts, not you.” All true. Yet we are responsible to make progress as preachers—indeed, evident and visible, or at least audible, progress (1 Tim 4:13, 15 is an instructive and searching Word in this respect!).

All of this led me, while traveling one day, to reflect on this: What “ten commandments,” what rule of preaching-life, do I wish someone had written for



It is the work we do, the conversations we have, the churches we attend, the preaching under which we sit, that make or break our ministries. This is not “do it yourself,” but we ourselves do need to do it.

me to provide direction, shape, ground rules that might have helped me keep going in the right direction and gaining momentum in ministry along the way?

Once one begins thinking about this, whatever “ten commandments” one comes up with, it becomes obvious that this is an inexhaustible theme. I offer these ten, then, not as infallible, but as the fruit of a few minutes of quiet reflection.

1. KNOW YOUR BIBLE BETTER

Often at the end of a Lord’s Day, or a conference, the thought strikes me again: “If you only knew your Bible better, you would have been a lot more help to the people.” I teach at a seminary whose founder stated that its goal was “to produce experts in the Bible.” Alas, I was not educated in an institution that had anything remotely resembling

that goal. The result? Life has been an ongoing “teach yourself while you play catch-up.” At the end of the day, seminaries exist not to give authoritative line-by-line interpretations of the whole of Scripture but to provide tools to enable its graduates to do that. That is why, in many ways, it is the work we do, the conversations we have, the churches we attend, the preaching under which we sit, that make or break our ministries. This is not “do it yourself,” but we ourselves do need to do it.

As an observer as well as a practitioner of preaching, I am troubled and perplexed by hearing men with wonderful equipment, humanly speaking (ability to speak, charismatic personality, and so on), who seem to be incapable of simply preaching the Scriptures. Somehow, they have not first invaded and gripped them.

I must not be an illiterate. But I do need to be

homo unius libri—a man of one Book. The widow of a dear friend once told me that her husband wore out his Bible during the last year of his life. “He devoured it like a novel,” she said. Be a Bible devourer!

2. BE A MAN OF PRAYER

I mean this with respect to preaching. Not only in the sense that I should pray before I begin my preparation, but in the sense that my preparation is itself a communion in prayer with God in and through his Word. Whatever did the apostles mean by saying that they needed to devote themselves “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4)—and why that order? My own feeling is that in the tradition of our pastoral textbooks, we have over-individualized this. The apostles (one may surmise) really meant “we”—not “I, Peter” or “I, John” but “we, Peter, John, James, Thomas, Andrew ... together.”

Is it a misreading of the situation to suspect that preachers hide the desperate need of prayer for the preaching, and their personal need? By contrast, reflect on Paul’s appeals. And remember Spurgeon’s bon mot when asked about the secret of his ministry: “My people pray for me.”

Reflecting on this reminds me of one moment in the middle of an address at a conference for pastors when the imaginary bubble above my head

contained the words “You are making a complete and total hash of this,” but as my eyes then refocused on the men in front of me, they seemed like thirsty souls drinking in cool, refreshing water, and their eyes all seemed to be fixed on the water carrier I was holding! Then, the above-the-head-bubble filled with other words: “I remember now how I urged the congregation at home to pray for these brethren and for the ministry of the Word. They have been praying.”

Alas for me if I don’t see the need for prayer or for encouraging and teaching my people to see its importance. I may do well (I have done well enough thus far, have I not?) ... but not with eternal fruit.

3. DON’T LOSE SIGHT OF CHRIST

Me? Yes, me. This is an important principle in too many dimensions fully to expound here. One must suffice. Know, and therefore preach, “Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). That is a text far easier to preach as the first sermon in a ministry than it is to preach as the final sermon.

What do I mean? Perhaps the point can be put sharply, even provocatively, in this way: Systematic exposition did not die on the cross for us; nor did biblical theology, nor even systematic theology or hermeneutics, or whatever else we deem important as those who handle the exposition of Scripture. I



Systematic exposition did not die on the cross for us; nor did biblical theology, nor even systematic theology or hermeneutics ...

have heard all of these in preaching ... without a center in the person of the Lord Jesus.

Paradoxically, not even systematic preaching through one of the Gospels guarantees Christ-crucified-centered preaching. Too often, preaching on the Gospels takes what I whimsically think of as the “Find Waldo approach.” The underlying question in the sermon is “Where are *you* to be found in this story?” (Are you Martha or Mary, James or John, Peter, the grateful leper ... ?). The question “where, who, and what is Jesus in this story?” tends to be marginalized.

The truth is it is far easier to preach about Mary, Martha, James, John, or Peter than it is about Christ. It is far easier to preach even about the darkness of sin and the human heart than to preach Christ. Plus, my bookshelves are groaning with literature on Mary, Martha ... the good life, the family life, the Spirit-filled life, the parenting life, the damaged-self life ... but most of us have only a few inches of shelf space on the person and work of Christ himself.

Am I absolutely at my best when talking about him, or about us?

4. BE DEEPLY TRINITARIAN

Surely we are? At least in some of our churches, not a Lord’s Day passes without the congregation confessing one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But as is commonly recognized, Western Christianity has often had a special tendency to either an explicit or a pragmatic Unitarianism, be it of the Father (i.e., Liberalism, for all practical purposes), the Son (evangelicalism, perhaps not least in its reactions against Liberalism), or the Spirit (charismaticism, with its reaction to both of the previous).

This is, doubtless, a caricature. But my concern here arises from a sense that Bible-believing preachers (as well as others) continue to think of the Trinity as the most speculative and therefore the least practical of all doctrines. After all, what can you “do” as a result of hearing preaching that emphasizes God as Trinity? Well, at least inwardly, if not outwardly, fall down in prostrate worship that the God whose being is so ineffable, so incomprehensible to my mental math, seeks fellowship with us!

I sometimes wonder if it is failure here that has led to churches actually to believe it when they are

told by “church analysts” and the like that “the thing your church does best is worship ... small groups, well, you need to work on that ...” Doesn’t that verge on blasphemy? (verge on it? There is surely only One who can assess the quality of our worship. This approach confuses aesthetics with adoration).

John’s Gospel suggests to us that one of the deepest burdens on our Lord’s heart during his last hours with his disciples was to help them understand that God’s being as Trinity is the heart of what makes the gospel both possible and actual, and that it is knowing him as such that forms the very lifeblood of the life of faith (cf. John chapters 13–17). Read Paul with this in mind, and it becomes obvious how profoundly woven into the warp and woof of his gospel his understanding of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is.

Our people need to know that, through the Spirit, their fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. Would they know that from your preaching?

5. USE YOUR IMAGINATION

Does this not contradict the immediately preceding observations that the truth of the Trinity should not be thought of as speculative metaphysics? No. Rather it is simply to state what the preaching masters of the centuries have either explicitly written or, at least by example, implied. All good preaching involves the use of the imagination. No great preacher has ever lacked imagination. Perhaps we might go so far as to say it is simply an exhortation to love the Lord our God with all of our ... mind ... and our neighbor as ourselves.

Scripture itself suggests that there are many different kinds of imagination—hence the different genres in which the Word of God is expressed (poetry, historical narrative, dialogue, monologue, history, vision, and so on). No two biblical authors had identical imaginations. It is doubtful if Ezekiel could have written Proverbs, for example!

What do we mean by “imagination”? Our dictionaries give a series of definitions. Common to them all seems to be the ability to “think outside of oneself;” “to be able to see or conceive the same thing in a different way.” In some definitions, the ideas of the ability to contrive, exercising resourcefulness, or the mind’s creative power are among the nuanced



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meanings of the word.

Imagination in preaching means being able to understand the truth well enough to translate or transpose it into another kind of language or musical key in order to present the same truth in a way that enables others to see it, understand its significance, feel its power—to do so in a way that gets under the skin, breaks through the barriers, grips the mind, will, and affections so that others not only understand the words used but feel their truth and power.

Luther did this by the sheer dramatic forcefulness of his speech. Whitefield did it by his use of dramatic expression (overdid it, in the view of some). Calvin—perhaps surprisingly—did it too by the extraordinarily earthed-in-Geneva-life language in which he expressed himself. So, an overwhelming Luther-personality, a dramatic preacher with Whitefieldian gifts of storytelling and voice (didn't David Garrick say he'd give anything to be able to say "Mesopotamia" the way George Whitefield

did?), a deeply scholarly, retiring, reluctant preacher—all did it, albeit in very different ways. They saw and heard the Word of God as it might enter the world of their hearers and convert and edify them.

What is the secret here? It is, surely, learning to preach the Word to yourself, from its context into your context, to make concrete in the realities of our lives the truth that came historically to others' lives. This is why the old masters used to speak about sermons going from their lips with power only when these had first come to their own hearts with power.

All of which leads us from the fifth commandment back to where we started. Only immersion in Scripture enables us to preach it this way. Therein lies the difference between preaching that is *about* the Bible and its message and preaching that seems to come right *out of* the Bible with a "thus says the Lord" ring of authenticity and authority.

This is, surely, a good place to end the "first table" of these "Commandments for Preachers." Now

Spiritual surgery must be done within the context of God's grace in Jesus Christ. Only by seeing our sin do we come to see the need for and wonder of grace.

it is time to go and soak ourselves in Scripture to get ready for the “second table.”

The first part of this “preacher’s decalogue” reflected on five commandments that I thought might helpfully have guided me from early days in ministry. Unlike the true Decalogue, these “commandments” make no claim to either inspiration or ultimate authority. They are the reflections of the moment. More prolonged reflection, or the stimulated reflection of others, might well produce a more coherent and perhaps more salutary list.

The first table of the “preacher’s decalogue” was as follows:

(1) Get to know your Bible better; (2) Be a man of prayer; (3) Don’t lose sight of Christ; (4) Be more deeply Trinitarian; (5) Use your imagination.

We turn now to the second table.

6. SPEAK MUCH OF SIN AND GRACE

In his exposition of Paul’s letter to the Romans,

Martin Luther insightfully used the words of Jeremiah’s call:

The sum total of this epistle is to destroy, root out, and bring to naught all carnal wisdom ... All that is in us is to be rooted out, pulled down, destroyed, and thrown down, i.e., all that delights us because it comes from us and is found in us; but all that is from outside of us and in Christ is to be built up and planted.

If that is true of Paul’s “preaching” in Romans, it ought to be true of ours as well. Sin and grace should be the downbeat and the upbeat that run through all our exposition.

But there are some cautions. Preaching on sin must unmask the presence of sin, and undeceive about the nature of sin, as well as underline the danger of sin.

This is not the same thing as hammering a congregation against the back wall of the “sanctuary” with

a tirade! That requires little more than high levels of emotion. A genuine, ultimately saving, unmasking and undeceiving of the human heart is more demanding exegetically and spiritually. For what is in view here is the skilled work of a surgeon—opening a wound, exposing the cause of the patient’s sickness, cutting away the destructive malignancies, all in order to heal and restore to life.

Doubtless, people need warnings against the evils of contemporary society (abortion, apostasy in the visible church, etc.). But we cannot build a ministry, nor healthy Christians, on a diet of fulminating against the world. No; rather, we do this by seeing the Scriptures expose the sin in our own hearts, undeceive us about ourselves, root out the poison that remains in our own hearts—and then helping our people to do the same “by the open statement of the truth” (2 Cor 4:2).

There is only one safe way to do this. Spiritual surgery must be done within the context of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Only by seeing our sin do we come to see the need for and wonder of grace. But exposing sin is not the same thing as unveiling and applying grace. We must be familiar with and exponents of its multifaceted power, and know how to apply it to a variety of spiritual conditions.

Truth to tell, exposing sin is easier than applying grace; for, alas, we are more intimate with the former than we sometimes are with the latter. Therein lies our weakness.

7. USE “THE PLAIN STYLE”

This is a familiar enough expression in the history of preaching. It is associated particularly with the contrast between the literary eloquence of the High Anglican preaching tradition and the new “plain style” of the Puritans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. William Perkins’s *The Arte of Prophesying* served as the first textbook in this school.

But this seventh commandment is not insisting, per se, that we should all preach like the Puritans. Indeed, acquaintance with the Puritans themselves would underline for us that they did not all preach as if they had been cloned from William Perkins! But they did have one thing in common: plain

speech, which they believed Paul commended and should be a leading characteristic of all preaching (2 Cor 6:7, cf. 4:2).

There are many ways this principle applies. Do not make eloquence the thing for which you are best known as a preacher; make sure you get the point of the passage you are preaching, and that you make it clear and express its power. True evangelical eloquence will take care of itself. Despite Charles Hodge’s reservations, Archibald Alexander was, in general, right in urging students to pay attention to the power of biblical ideas; the words used in preaching will take care of themselves.

The “masters” of clear style can teach us here. Paradoxically, in this context, two of them were themselves Anglicans.

C. S. Lewis’s counsel on writing applies equally to preaching: Use language that makes clear what you really mean; prefer plain words that are direct to long words that are vague. Avoid abstract words when you can use concrete. Don’t use adjectives to tell us how you want us to feel—make us feel that by what you say! Don’t use words that are too big for their subject. Don’t use “infinitely” when you mean “very,” otherwise you will have no word left when you really do mean infinitely!

In a similar vein, here is J. C. Ryle’s counsel: Have a clear knowledge of what you want to say. Use simple words. Employ a simple sentence structure. Preach as though you had asthma! Be direct. Make sure you illustrate what you are talking about.

Of course, there are exceptions to these principles. But why would I think I am one? A brilliant surgeon may be able to perform his operation with poor instruments; so can the Holy Spirit. But since in preaching we are nurses in the operating room—our basic responsibility is to have clean, sharp, sterile scalpels for the Spirit to do his surgery.

8. FIND YOUR OWN VOICE

“Voice” here is used in the sense of personal style—that is, “know yourself,” if one can Christianize the wisdom of the philosophers.

That being said, finding a voice—in the literal sense—is also important. The good preacher who

Some men never grow as preachers because the “preaching suit” they have borrowed does not actually fit them, or their gifts.

uses his voice badly is a *rara avis* indeed. Clearly, affectation should be banned; nor are we actors whose voices are molded to the part that is to be played. But our creation as the image of God, creatures who speak—and speak his praises and his Word—really requires us to do all we can with the natural resources the Lord has given us.

But it is “voice” in the metaphorical sense that is really in view here—our approach to preaching that makes it authentically “our” preaching and not a slavish imitation of someone else’s. Yes, we may—must—learn from others, positively and negatively. Further, it is always important when others preach to listen to them with both ears open: one for personal nourishment through the ministry of the Word, and the other to try to detect the principles that make this preaching helpful to people.

We ought not to become clones. Some men never grow as preachers because the “preaching suit” they have borrowed does not actually fit them, or their gifts. Instead of becoming the outstanding expository, or redemptive historical, or God-centered, or whatever their hero may be, preacher, we may tie ourselves in knots and endanger our own unique giftedness by trying to use someone else’s paradigm, style, or personality as a mold into which to squeeze ourselves. In doing so, we become less than our true selves in Christ. The marriage of our personality with another’s preaching style can be a recipe for

being dull and lifeless. So, it is worth taking the time in an ongoing way to try to assess who and what we really are as preachers in terms of strengths and weaknesses.

9. LEARN HOW TO TRANSITION

There is a short (two pages) but wonderful “must-read” section for preachers in the Westminster Assembly’s *Directory for the Public Worship of God*. Inter alia, the Divines state that the preacher “In exhorting to duties . . . is, as he seeth cause, to teach also the means that help to the performance of them.” In contemporary speech, this means that our preaching will answer the “how to?” question.

This perhaps requires further explanation.

Many of us are weary of the pandemic of “how-to-ness” we find in much contemporary preaching. It is often little better than psychology (however helpful) with a little Christian polish; it is largely imperative without indicative, and in the last analysis becomes self- and success-oriented rather than sin- and grace-oriented. But there is a Reformed and, more importantly, biblical emphasis on teaching how to transition from the old ways to the new way, from patterns of sin to patterns of holiness. It is not enough to stress the necessity, nor even the possibility, of this. We must teach people how this happens.

Years ago I took one of our sons for golf coaching from an old friend who had become a highly

regarded teaching professional. My son was not, as they say, “getting on to the next level.” I could see that; but no longer had I (if I ever had!) the golfing *savoir faire* to help. Enter my friend, and within the space of one coaching session, the improvement in ball-striking was both visible and audible (there is something about the sound of a perfectly struck drive—or home run, for that matter!).

This is, in part, what we are called to effect in our handling of the Scriptures—not “this is wrong ... this is right”—but by our preaching to enable and effect the transition.

But how? For all its criticism of the pragmatism of evangelicalism, Reformed preaching is not always skilled in this area. Many are stronger on doctrine than on exegesis; and often stronger on soul-searching than on spiritual upbuilding. We need to learn how to expound the Scriptures in such a way that the very exposition empowers in our hearers the transitions from the old patterns of life in Adam to the new patterns of life in Christ.

How do we do this? To begin with, by expounding the Scriptures in a way that makes clear that the indicatives of grace ground the imperatives of faith and obedience and also effect them. This we must learn to do in a way that brings out of the text how *the text itself teaches* how transformation takes place and how the power of the truth itself sanctifies (cf. John 17:17).

This usually demands that we stay down in the text longer, more inquisitively than we sometimes do, asking the text: “Show me how your indicatives effect your imperatives.” Such study often yields the surprising (is it surprising?) result: depth study of Scripture means that we are not left scurrying to the Christian bookshop or the journal on counseling in order to find out how the gospel changes lives ... No, we have learned that the Scriptures themselves teach us the answer to the “what?” questions and also the answer to the “how to?” question.

Do we—far less our congregations—know “how to”? Have we told them they need to do it but left them to their own devices rather than modeling it in our preaching?

Some years ago, at the end of a church conference,

the local minister, whom I knew from his student days, said to me: “Just before I let you go tonight, will you do one last thing? Will you take me through the steps that are involved so that we learn to mortify sin?”

I was touched—that he would broach what was obviously a personal as well as pastoral concern with me; but perhaps even more so by his assumption that I would be able to help. (How often we who struggle are asked questions we ourselves need to answer!) He died not long afterwards, and I think of his question as his legacy to me, causing me again and again to see that we need to exhibit what John “Rabbi” Duncan of New College said was true of Jonathan Edwards’s preaching: “His doctrine was all application, and his application was all doctrine.

The ministry that illustrates this, and that understands what is involved in how preaching transitions its hearers from the old to the new, will have what Thomas Boston once said about his own ministry—“a certain tincture” that people will recognize even if they cannot articulate or explain why it is so different and so helpful.

10. LOVE YOUR PEOPLE

John Newton wrote that his congregation would take almost anything from him, however painful, because they knew “I mean to do them good.”

This is a litmus test for our ministry. It means that my preparation is a more sacred enterprise than simply satisfying my own love of study; it means that my preaching will have characteristics about it, difficult to define but nevertheless sensed by my hearers, that reflect the apostolic principle:

What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake (2 Cor 4:5 ESV).

We were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us (1 Thess 2:8 ESV)

In Jesus Christ, the church’s One True Preacher,

message and messenger are one. He is the Preacher, and also the message. That is not true of us. But, in union with Christ (and we preach “in Christ” as well as live and die “in Christ”), a coalescence of a lesser sort takes place: the truth of the message is conveyed by the preacher whose spirit is conformed to the grace of God in the message. How can it be otherwise when preaching involves “God ... making his appeal through us” (2 Cor 5:20)? “A preacher’s life,” wrote Thomas Brooks, “should be a commentary upon his doctrine; his practice should be the counterpane [counterpart] of his sermons. Heavenly doctrines should always be adorned with a heavenly life.”

A “preacher’s decalogue” might be helpful; but at

the end of the day, we are nourished not by the commands of law but by the provisions of God’s grace in the gospel. It is as true of our preaching as of our living that what law cannot do, because of the weakness of our flesh, God accomplishes through Christ, in order to fulfill his commands in us by the Spirit. In the words of Charles Wesley,

*May it be so for us! Then we will be
able truly to sing:*

Happy if with my latest breath,

I might but gasp his Name

Preach him to all, and cry in death

Behold, behold the Lamb. ♦

BE A BETTER PREACHER



1. Know your Bible better
2. Be a man of prayer
3. Don’t lose sight of Christ
4. Be deeply Trinitarian
5. Use your imagination
6. Speak much of sin and grace
7. Use “the plain style”
8. Find your own voice
9. Learn how to transition
10. Love your people



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HOLY BIBLE

PREACHING AS WARFARE

DEREK W.H. THOMAS

“**W**age the good warfare” (1 Tim 1:18 ESV). So Paul urges his younger protégé, Timothy. Preachers are caught up in a war of words and ideas, truth and falsehood, then as now. And Timothy is being given his marching orders—“Stand your ground, because this is a fight to the death,” Paul is saying to him.

Paul met Timothy at Lystra and became a fellow traveler in gospel outreach and communication. They found themselves in such places as Thessalonica (1 Thess 3:2), Corinth (1 Cor 4:17) and Jerusalem (Acts 20:4). Timothy seems to have been present when Paul

was imprisoned in Rome (Phil 2:19), and together, they cooperated on six New Testament letters—2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon.

Timothy is probably in his thirties when the charge to “fight the good fight” (KJV) is made, “a child in the faith” in Paul’s eyes (1 Tim 1:2). Some looked down on his youthfulness with some disdain, but Timothy is urged to remember his calling and keep his focus on Christ and the gospel (1 Tim 4:12; cf. 2 Tim 2:22). Given some kind of supernatural gift at the time of his ordination (when a group of elders laid hands on him, see 1 Tim 1:18; 4:14), Timothy’s life ever since was that

of a preacher.

Timothy's call to preach came from God. Some, as C. H. Spurgeon wrote, "stumble into the pulpit" instead of being summoned into it. "It is a fearful calamity to a man to miss his calling," Spurgeon continues, "and to the church upon whom he imposes himself, his mistake involves an affliction of the most grievous kind"

Every preacher needs an assurance that he is "appointed to the ministry" (1 Tim 1:12, paraphrased). The work is too demanding, too exacting, to enter it without a summons from Almighty God. And what a calling it is! "To me," Martyn Lloyd-Jones remarked, "the work of preaching is the highest and the greatest and the most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called."

Following Paul's release from prison (the event recorded at the end of Acts), Timothy remained at Ephesus. As Paul writes 1 Timothy, urging his protégé to battle, Timothy has been the preaching pastor in Ephesus for perhaps a few months. Did Timothy write and ask for help? Or did Paul anticipate Timothy's potential problems? We do not know. Still, it is of interest to ask: What kind of warfare did Timothy find himself in at this point?

Paul hints at some of problems facing young Timothy—"myths and endless genealogies" (1 Tim 1:4), for example. Those whose sole interest is Bible trivia and speculative opinions. Then there are the "quarrelsome" (1 Tim 3:3; 6:4 ESV), who love to win an argument and demonstrate their commitment to "principle," but not for love of the truth. Their point is simply to argue for its own sake—for the "fun" of it. Some, for sure, were teaching "strange doctrines" (1 Tim 1:3), which Timothy is to do his utmost to stop. These false doctrines include erroneous interpretations of the Mosaic law (1 Tim 1:4–11).

Modern preachers live in similar circumstances to Timothy. They (we!) face opposition and temptation from myth-indulgers and false teachers, who beckon preachers to lose sight of the goal. With Paul's admonition to Timothy in mind, we need to ask ourselves, What kinds of opposition do modern preachers face? Four in particular come to mind:

1. THE TEMPTATION TO PREACH ABOUT OURSELVES.

This temptation is often a subtle one. Preachers desire

to show how approachable they are, declaring aspects of their brokenness and frailty, revealing that they too are vessels of clay—a celebratory fragility that shows they have a past. All this in the interest of asserting that the past is "under the blood"—forgiven and washed away. Thus, in the interest of preaching justification by faith apart from any degree of holiness on *our* part, preachers slide into preaching *themselves*, making much of past sins and failures in order to encourage equally failing disciples.

Sometimes, it is less subtle. Illustrations about preachers' families—sometimes funny, often not, and presenting an all-too-human pastor that suddenly dominates the sermon.

Paul recognized this dilemma clearly, expressing in his letter to Corinth a defiant opposition to focusing on self: "For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor 4:5). Preaching must be about Christ and the gospel. Our stance must be to mimic the Master who alone can preach *Himself*: "Beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures." (Luke 24:27). Jesus may preach about himself, but we dare not!

2. THE TEMPTATION TO BE "WELL THOUGHT OF."

Who doesn't want to be liked? Masochists and misfits, perhaps. Most of us find life goes a lot easier when others speak well of us.

Of course, you can make yourself dislikeable all too easily. Jesus' warning is not a call to be mean. There are preachers who seem to be permanently angry. Even when preaching the gospel and calling sinners to Christ, they seem to be angry about the state of those whom they address, forgetting that sometimes, we need to be to be gentle, loving, kind, and persuading in our preaching.

Conversely, preachers sometimes feel the need to cut doctrinal corners in an attempt to be accommodating and tolerant. Hard-edged truths such as the need for eye-gouging repentance (Matt 5:29), or countercultural loyalty to biblical assessment of homosexual practice, abortion, or the role of women in ecclesiastical office, are blunted to soften the contrast with contemporary taboos.



Every preacher needs an assurance that he is “appointed to the ministry” (1 Tim 1:12). The work is too demanding, too exacting, to enter it without a summons from Almighty God. And what a calling it is!

Jesus addresses this temptation to self-congratulation in clear language: “Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way” (Luke 6:26).

3. THE TEMPTATION TO LIMITED VISION.

Every preacher has pet themes, ones that he is comfortable addressing. And then there are other issues—equally or more important—that preachers avoid, perhaps because they are “too hot to handle” in a particular context. Every preacher must decide what is “first of all” and what is “second” and “third” (cf. 1 Cor 15:3, “I delivered to you as of *first* importance,” emphasis

added). Not every issue is worthy of sacrificing a ministry opportunity.

How, then, can preachers maintain a good conscience (cf. “a good conscience and sincere faith,” 1 Tim 1:5; cf. 1:19) and offer loyal commitment to the Lord in all matters? After all, Paul told the elders in Ephesus (where Timothy now resides), “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27). How can we make a judgment between what is “wise” or “expedient” and what are the demands of loyalty to the truth of God’s Word?

In the long run, a commitment to faithful expository preaching, verse-by-verse exposition of the whole of Scripture, can assist in the prevention of theological

hobby-horse preaching. It is not a guarantee against such failure—we can still avoid preaching on certain books of the Bible, for example. But expository preaching will help prevent pulpit mischief that is more about the preacher than it is about the faithful proclamation of the Word of God.

4. THE TEMPTATION TO HYPOCRISY.

Commitment to “faith and a good conscience” (1 Tim 1:19) requires that a preacher *practice* what he preaches. Paul Johnson’s important book *The Intellectuals*—a tour de force examination of the lives of such men as Marx, Tolstoy, Sartre and Chomsky—demonstrates all too clearly just how many of the leading social-philosopher thinkers were simply attempting to justify their own immoral lives.

Sadly, the same can be said of too many preachers. For example, some preachers downplay the need for observable, measureable holiness by obedience to the law despite clear instruction to the contrary: Christ was sent “so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:4). In a laudable attempt to maintain the purity of the gospel, including Christ’s obedience *for us*, active commands for ethical conformity on our part (as evidence of regeneration and faith) are turned into something passive—the obedience is viewed as Christ’s obedience on our behalf. Active sanctification is constantly turned into a forensic understanding of positional, definitive sanctification. Why? Perhaps—*perhaps*—to mask the lack of holiness in the preacher’s own life!

Robert Murray M’Cheyne’s haunting advice remains relevant a century and a half after he uttered it: “What your people need from you most is your own personal holiness.” I have lost count of the number of times I have repeated this to myself. Were I to have a personal philosophy of ministry summarized in one sentence, I think this is more or less what it would be. My congregation needs a pastor who is not only sound doctrinally, resolute in commitment to the truth, and courageous in proclaiming the whole counsel of God without the fear or favor men; it also needs a pastor who is sincere and honest. Paul knew how easily pride can mask the need for godliness; hence, his warning to Timothy: “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will

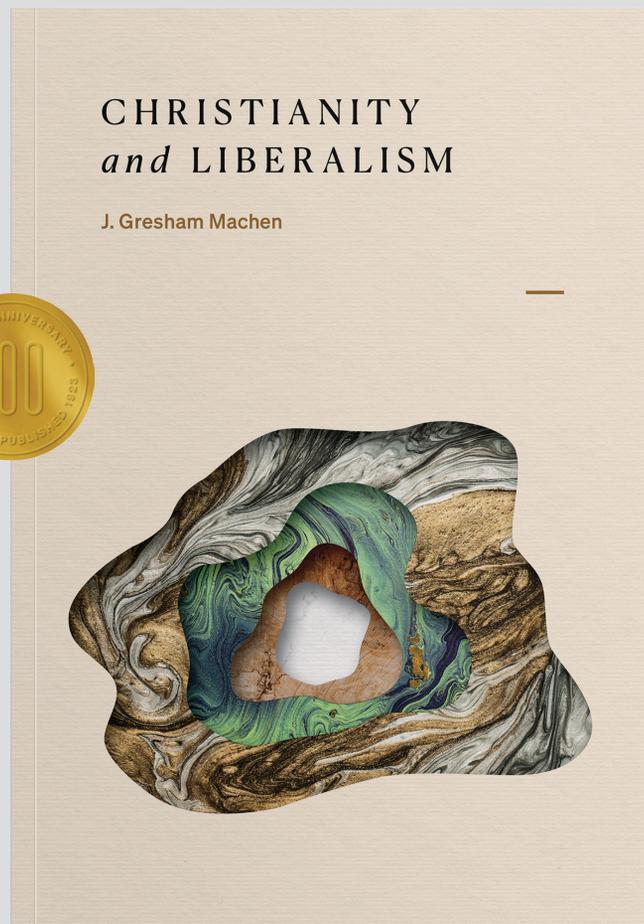
save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim 4:16 ESV). Truth is, far too much ministry is motivated by personal ambition—ministry is viewed as another opportunity to promote an image—“*selfie*-motivated ministry.”

What preacher has not known the curse of Saturday Night Fever! A week spent in diverse (perhaps even legitimate) concerns has kept us away from the very things we wish to tell hurting Christians on Sunday morning. “I desperately spent feverish hours on Saturday evening,” one pastor confessed, “trying to get right with God in time for Sunday!”

Have you known this? It is the curse of “*busy-ness*”—engaging in the good work of ministry (busy work) and forgetting (avoiding?) the best. What preacher hasn’t exhorted with great passion concerning the need for personal prayer and Bible study only to have the conscience declare as we preach—“Hello? Hypocrite! Are you listening to what it is you are saying?” It is all too real a possibility: “They made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept!” (Song 1:6 ESV). What a tragedy to have to admit: “I watched the flock, but I failed to watch myself. I gave other people fine advice about all kinds of relevant and thorny issues, and yet I failed to exhort my own heart.” *Preacher, fight this temptation with every fiber of your being, calling on the Holy Spirit to energize you.*

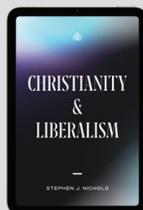
We pastor-preachers find ourselves in a war—culturally, ecclesiastically, homiletically. There are truths to uphold, errors to combat, lifestyles to negate and emulate. Every time we preach, Satan is there attempting to hold us back from declaring the truth. As preachers, “we must resist him, firm in [the] faith” (1 Pet 5:9), confident that the Holy Spirit can empower us above our natural ability. We must believe that God can help us on every occasion to stand firm for Him no matter what the consequences may be.

Truth—*God’s truth*—is under attack by contemporary culture. And the fact of the matter is, this truth-denying culture has seeped into the life of the contemporary church. Soldiers are needed, ready to fight and be killed in defense of the truth. Godly men of discernment, conviction, passion, and focus who have one aim—to be faithful to the Master who has called them into gospel ministry no matter the cost. Will you be one of them? ♦



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CRAFTING THE EXPOSITION

IAN HAMILTON

Preparing a sermon is the most exciting and exhausting, delightful and demanding, privileged and humbling experience in the life of a gospel minister. After thirty-five years of preparing and preaching sermons, I feel more, not less, out of my depth than I did when I first began to preach. But I trust that is a hopeful sign.

THE PREACHER'S FUNDAMENTAL CONVICTION

My primary concern in saying this is to establish at the outset how vital it is for a minister of the gospel

to approach the living Word of the living God with a palpable sense of being out of his depth. When Paul comes to conclude his astonishing exposition of what he calls “the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1), he cries out in doxology, “Oh, the depth!” As we approach the text of holy Scripture, if we are not constrained by a felt sense that we are about to enter the unfathomable depths of the revealed wisdom and knowledge of God, we need urgently either to turn aside and cry out to our gracious Lord in prayer, or lay aside any thought of preaching His Word.

In preparation, as much as in preaching, attitude is everything. A sermon is not the mere recitation

of biblical truths, however precious. A sermon is more than, if not less than, accurate exegesis. A sermon is mined from the living Word of God by men whose lives have been captured, captivated, and overwhelmed by the glorious gospel of the blessed God—or better, by the blessed God who is Himself the glorious gospel.

How we go about the task of “crafting an exposition,” isolating the text’s central idea (if it has one), and creating an exegetically faithful pastoral outline is paramount. The mention of “pastoral” in the previous sentence is intended to make an important point. All preaching should be pervasively pastoral for the simple reason that our hearers are God’s precious sheep. Preachers are under-shepherds called to feed the flock of Christ. Therefore, how preachers construct the various elements of their sermons should reflect the inherently pastoral, caring, feeding nature of their calling. When the Lord Jesus told Peter, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:15–18 ESV), He was clarifying and establishing the principal (and I mean “principal”) character of the Christian pastor’s calling to preach the word.

The minister of the gospel, therefore, must never approach the text of God’s Word clinically or dispassionately. He must always come to the text as a man constrained by doxology and the pastoral heart of a

true under-shepherd in the flock of God. Preparation as much as preaching is to be punctuated with a spirit of exclamatory doxology and a pervasive sense of loving care for the Lord’s sheep.

The primary concern of this essay is to reflect on how we craft a sermon, especially how we isolate a text’s central idea and thereafter create an outline that faithfully, biblically, theologically, and pastorally reflects the text’s central idea.

THE PREACHER’S FIRST TASK

The preacher’s first task is to locate his text—one verse or a discrete pericope or larger section—within the flow of redemptive history. God’s Word is an organic whole. It is the unfolding and developing story of God’s predestined purpose to make His Son “the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom 8:29). It is not a string of pearls, far less a disconnected arrangement of divinely inspired literary genres. Every section of Scripture relates organically to every other section of Scripture. It is only by locating our preaching text within Scripture’s organic whole that we can rightly understand what the central idea of our text is.

The Bayeux Tapestry is an embroidered cloth, nearly 230 feet long and 20 inches tall, that depicts the events leading up to the Norman conquest of



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England in the eleventh century. It is a magnificent embroidery, but it can only be truly appreciated when you stand far enough back to take in the panorama of the embroidered drama. So it is with preaching. The perennial danger facing the preacher is getting too close to the text in front of his eyes and failing to grasp the panorama of the biblical drama within which the text is located.

Let me illustrate the point I am trying to make. Our preaching text is Luke 9:28–36. Jesus is en route to Jerusalem. He has just told His disciples that “the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day” (Luke 9:22). In his account of the transfiguration, Luke uses a striking word that casts us back to the Exodus. He tells us that Moses and Elijah spoke with Jesus about His “departure” (ἔλεγον τὴν ἔξοδον αὐτοῦ). *ἔξοδος* literally means “way out, exodus.” Luke is telling us that Jesus is the greater than Moses who will lead His people out of their bondage to sin and into the “liberty of the children of God” (Rom 8:21 NKJV). One key word can alert us to the keynote that the author is seeking to strike in his narrative.

A second concern of the preacher is to locate and explicate his text within the flow and purpose of the particular book of the Bible he is expounding. Again, let me illustrate. If our preaching text is located within John 14–17, what is sometimes called “The Upper Room Discourse of Christ,” two things in particular must be in the forefront of the preacher’s mind: First, the dominant note or motif that John expressly tells us runs like a golden thread through his Gospel (20:31), which is a self-conscious evangelistic tract for the times. Throughout his Gospel, John’s primary concern is not merely to inform his readers but to persuade his readers and win them to a living, saving faith in Jesus. This principal (*I do mean “principal,” not “principal”!) hermeneutical note must inform and shape in some way any textually faithful exposition of John 14–17. Second, within that larger, overall concern, the immediate context of these verses finds our Savior ministering comfort and hope to his deeply distressed disciples. There is little doubt that John 14:1 shapes and informs the words our Lord Jesus will speak to His disciples in the following chapters.

Jesus is not giving them teaching unconnected to their troubled hearts and distempered minds. Rather, He is seeking to set before them the perichoretic life and ministry of the triune God, a life and ministry they are to sink their lives into and find the greatest comfort and hope. As we have often read and heard, the first rule of biblical interpretation is context, context, context.

It may now be helpful to focus on a particular biblical passage and seek to show how these introductory comments will help us to expound God’s Word faithfully.

MARK 2:13–17: UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

When we preach from one of the four Gospels, we must keep in mind that these Gospels were a unique form of literature in the ancient world. Biographies had been written of famous men, but the Gospels are not in any sense biographies of Jesus. They are “Gospels,” messages of good news to a world sunk in sin and rebellion against God.

Jesus Himself sets the fundamental template that will shape and style Mark’s Gospel: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (1:14–15). The central idea that runs through Mark’s Gospel is the coming, the long-promised coming, of God’s kingdom in the person of Jesus, God’s Messiah-King. Throughout the Gospel, and not least in 2:13–17, Jesus is acting as a king, fulfilling what the Old Testament prophesied concerning God’s Messiah.

THE PRINCIPAL IDEA: A MAN ON A MISSION

It would be wrong to think that a particular text of Scripture, small or large, necessarily contains one principal idea. However, it is often the case that one idea or motif does shape and permeate biblical pericopes. We are perhaps now able to ask the question whether indeed one, or more than one, principal idea dominates Mark 2:13–17.

The answer surely is that one note overshadows and defines Mark 2:13–17, and indeed, the whole of Mark’s Gospel: Jesus is “a man on a mission.” However, although this is the principal idea that dominates the horizon of this text, it is an idea with a

number of related adjuncts.

First, Jesus Himself both identifies and defines the nature of His mission. In 1:14–15, He tells us His mission is to announce and inaugurate the kingdom of God, the personal reign and rule of God in His creation.

Second, in 2:17, Jesus further explicates what this coming of God’s kingdom involves: “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” There is a deeply personal dimension to Jesus’ mission. He has come to populate the kingdom of God with repentant sinners.

Third, but if we are to make biblical sense of Jesus “the man on a mission,” we need to stand back from the parameters of our text and understand that Jesus is on a mission entrusted to Him by His Father. It would be missing the whole point of Mark’s Gospel to see Jesus here pursuing a mission of His own initiative. He is where he is as the Sent One of the Father. He has come from heaven not to do His own will but the will of the One who sent Him (John 6:38). He is a man on a divinely ordained mission.

Fourth, it would also be wholly wrong to think of Jesus as merely dutifully fulfilling this mission the Father entrusted to Him. Jesus is in perfect harmony with the will of His Father to seek and save the lost. Although in the Gospels and the New Testament as a whole, love is almost always predicated of the Father (John 3:16; 1 John 4:10), Jesus, no less than His Father, loved the world (Matt 9:38). It is the love of God that has brought Jesus into this broken, sin-defaced, sin-darkened world.

Fifth, in the story of the healing and saving of the paralyzed man (2:1–12), Mark introduced us to one of the underlying themes in his Gospel: the conflict between the religious leaders and Jesus over the character of God and the offer of free forgiveness through Jesus. But the conflict was deeper than that. Jesus, the “man on a mission,” is living out the elemental conflict announced by God in Genesis 3:15, the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness, between God himself and the Evil One.” The whole Bible from Genesis 3:15 to Revelation 22:22 is a commentary on the conflict God inaugurated between the seed of the woman and Satan. Mark highlights this note of elemental conflict in the four stories which follow the healing of the paralyzed man.

THE SERMON OUTLINE

One of the dangers preachers face in preparation is imposing an outline on the preached text that is memorable but artificial. Any outline must reflect the context, the content, and the redemptive character of the text and do so manifestly. The outline is not an opportunity for the preacher to display his fertile ingenuity. He is himself always to be a man under the Word.

What does Mark tell us about Jesus and his mission in these verses that will enable us to devise a helpful outline, that is, an outline that will help God’s people better understand God’s Word? What follows is but one hopefully helpful and textually faithful outline. Following the central thought of





A sermon is, at heart, an occasion when God speaks to men and women of himself and his surpassing grace in his Son, the God-Man Jesus Christ.

“Jesus, a man on a mission,” we can see three fundamental characteristics of his mission in these verses:

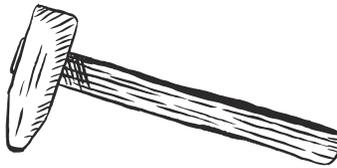
First, Jesus’ mission showcased the extravagant, unsettling grace of God. He called Levi, a tax collector, to follow him. To identify with a tax collector was both a culturally and deeply religiously “unthinkable.” Tax collectors were collaborators with the hated Roman occupiers. They were execrated by Jewish society. But Jesus called Levi to follow him. The grace of God is religiously surprising and socially unsettling.

Second, Jesus’ mission confronted the spiritual corruption of the covenant people’s religious leaders (vv. 16–17). The narrow-heartedness of the Pharisees is strikingly contrasted to the large-heartedness of Jesus. This is a note that runs through the Gospels. The Gospel writers take every opportunity to highlight the sheer generosity of God’s grace in Christ to men and women written off by the Pharisees and their acolytes. Jesus’ mission is a mission, preeminently, of grace (John 3:17).

Third, Jesus’ mission summoned sinners to a life of unconditional discipleship: “Follow me” (v. 14). The unilateral character of Jesus’ summons is intended to search out the hearts of would-be disciples. Mark, throughout his Gospel, wants his readers to understand that following Jesus is to be unconditional. The kingdom’s King is worthy of our utmost and our everything.

Each of these three points further unpacks what it meant for Jesus to “[proclaim] the gospel of God” (1:14–15 ESV). The gospel of the kingdom of God is the primary thematic note that runs through the whole of Mark’s Gospel. As such, it casts its instructive shadow over the unfolding redemptive drama that Mark records. It is therefore imperative that the preacher should relate whatever discrete section of the Gospel he is preaching on to its principal thematic note.

A sermon is, at heart, an occasion when God speaks to men and women of himself and his surpassing grace in his Son, the God-Man Jesus Christ. The sermon’s aim is faithfully to explain and apply God’s Word in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is never to be a vehicle for the fertile imagination, far less the theological hobby horses of the preacher. In all of his sermonic endeavours, the preacher is to be shaped and directed in his thinking and preaching by the epicenter of God’s saving revelation, the grace and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:23; 2:2). It needs hardly to be said, but say it I will: undergirding all the preacher’s preparation and preaching will be the heartfelt conviction, “Without you, Lord, I can do nothing.” Deeply conscious, prayerful dependence on God, will, of necessity, be the manifest heartbeat that registers in the preacher’s words and in the listeners’ ears. ♦



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