

Chapter 23

Preaching in the New Church

There is much confusion about preaching today. Some are advocating only one form of preaching; others seem to have abandoned preaching in the name of cultural relevance. Neither of these positions is helpful as you plant a new church. But the preaching of the Word is a mark of a true church whether that preaching is in a circle of ten in a house church or in front of thousands at a rented conference center.

Preaching in a new church offers unique challenges. In a gathering made up of believers and nonbelievers, preaching must both edify believers and encourage nonbelievers. We must grow in our preaching skills if we cannot do both. While Jesus preached a straightforward gospel, he demonstrated that preaching is not just opening the Bible, reading words, and providing commentary.

In a new church, preaching should be simple but not simplistic. The Scriptures are given not only for information but also for transformation. The preacher may impress listeners with arcane theological truths that offer no life and hope, or the preacher may help transform lives with the truths of Christ's life-changing presence. The latter result is God's intention for Christian preaching.

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Yet for many, preaching is seen as almost an embarrassment. Some new churches want to abandon preaching in their attempt to be more relevant. I've walked that road myself. I've preached a lot of sermons that were more about my opinions than God's Word. Sure, they were based on biblical principles ("love your wife," "don't worry," "work hard") but not grounded in the biblical story of redemption. Then, Donna (my wife) told me that after all our years together she felt that she did not know the Bible well. As her pastor, I had taught her how to be a godly person but not how to understand our God revealed in the Bible.

The need for biblical preaching has never been more urgent. Biblical preaching is more than commonsense truth with biblical proofs taken out of context. Instead, it is letting the agenda and shape of Scripture determine the agenda and shape of the message. I've learned that I have not taken it seriously enough, and I think I am not alone. As we have planted Lake Ridge Church, we have made sure that the Bible and the story of redemption are more central in our preaching.

Good preaching usually does not focus on theological truths without application; both are present. When the Bible presents theological truth, it almost always weds that revelation to relational application. The high kenotic hymn in Philippians 2:6–11 says this about Christ: "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped." This is theological material, but it's important to remember how the hymn begins: "Have this attitude in yourselves which is also in Christ Jesus." Any presentation of the theological truths (about the preexistence of Christ, etc.), needs to include practical application (about how our attitude is to be changed by Christ's example).

The reverse is true as well. Almost all relational truth comes from passages of Scripture rooted in the story of redemption. You can't preach the last part of Ephesians (no unwholesome words, love your spouse, work hard) without preaching the first part (we were dead and God made us alive, his incomparable power working in us). If we preach "do good" and "try harder" without the truth of the power of God working in us, we have presented an applicable sermon without the power to apply it.

Listeners need a time for hearing technical theological truths because these serve as foundations for life changes. The challenge is a balance of theological content and life application. At the beginning of the new

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church, preaching may be more practical; but felt-needs preaching is not a long-term, viable strategy for preaching.

Expositional Preaching

All biblical preaching should be expositional preaching. Exposition means a presentation of the meaning or intent. All true preaching explains the meaning and intent of the Bible. This does not necessarily mean that preaching has to be a verse-by-verse study of the Bible. It does mean that it has to convey accurately the meaning and intent of the Bible.

The unmistakable admonition of 2 Timothy 4:2 is, “Preach the Word.” These verses do not commend personal opinions, nor do they validate fads. Paul’s directive to Timothy was, “Preach the Word.”

Scripture-based preaching is not always popular. Unchurched people and believers who haven’t defined their biblical values often take offense at the preaching of the cross. Such thinking may create friction between the pastor and unchurched people. The church planter, nevertheless, has been called to “preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Tim. 4:2). The church planter must allow the text to set the agenda and to address the issues.

It’s been interesting to be a part of (and now an observer of) the church growth movement of the 1980s and 1990s. Some people taught cultural truths with scriptural footnoting. They would describe some universal truth (you should be good to your spouse, for example), and then explain that the Bible agrees. In the last few years, such preaching seems to be less common. Increasingly new churches reaching emerging generations are saying, “This is what the Bible says, and this is how to apply it. We are trying our best to apply it in our lives, and you can too.” I think that’s good news.

On the other hand, there seems to be a significant minority who say that all preaching needs to be verse by verse. For some people, expository preaching has become synonymous with verse-by-verse preaching. This causes some to argue that verse-by-verse exposition is the only valid form of preaching. If that were true, then the early church heard no preaching at all for at least 350 years, until the time of John Chrysostom, who popularized this form.

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For the purposes of this book, I'll define expository preaching as "proclamation that exposes people to the truths of God's Word." Albert Mohler says, "For a sermon to be genuinely biblical, the text must set the agenda as the foundation of the message, and not as a spiritual authority cited for spiritual footnoting. Scripture should be central."¹ Expository preaching does not make statements and look to the Bible for support; it begins by examining the Scriptures.

Contemporary churches have been criticized for their lack of expository preaching. Some of it is from misunderstandings. However, some of it is also because some new churches have abandoned biblically based, expositional preaching. The Bible is not their sermon text; it barely impacts their sermon text.

I've seen too many churches advocate subtly that winning people to Christ necessitates laying aside the Bible. One pastor in a Bible Belt state explained his strategy as having people attend a "little pep talk" each Sunday morning in order to offer them encouragement and then send them home. That church has shortened its service time to a maximum of forty-five minutes. The end results will be disastrous if the pastor-planter does not preach the Word. The pastor-planter *must* preach the Word.

We need innovative preaching, but we also must take people to the Word, not just give them commonsense wisdom they can get watching Wayne Dyer on PBS.

I recently interviewed Andy Stanley for a future project on key leaders and their characteristics. I believe Andy expressed the concern for biblical preaching well. Andy explained:

[Preaching] is a journey... I am going to start by making sure... everybody knows where we are going... and they know why they need to go with me. Once I have built enough tension for someone to give a rip about what we are going to talk about, then I am going to take them to a passage of Scripture where somebody resolves or expresses that tension. And I am going to stay there long enough so hopefully they will go back that afternoon, and they will say, "I understand this part of the Bible." Then I am going to talk about what to do and what a wonderful world it would be like if we all just do this. It is really that simple.

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That requires taking the time to prepare biblical sermons. Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill Church explains how he prepares: “In studying a passage to preach, I ask three questions: Who is God? How is He revealed in this text? What are the most natural inclinations that resist or deny that truth? Then, for the rest of the sermon, I seek out that resistance and break it.”²

Most importantly, biblical preaching is gospel-centered preaching. By gospel-centered, I am not referring to continual evangelistic preaching—every week a sermon on how to get saved. Instead, the gospel is the means by which life change occurs. Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian describes the process of being sure that the gospel always is presented as the means of transformation:

At the heart of Redeemer’s ministry and its philosophy of preaching to post-modern audiences is the conviction that “the gospel” is not just a way to be saved from the penalty of sin, but is the fundamental dynamic for living the whole Christian life—individually and corporately, privately and publicly.... It is more accurate to say that we are saved by believing the gospel, and then we are transformed in every part of our mind, heart, and life by believing the gospel more and more deeply as our life goes on.³

Four Kinds of Expositional Preaching

The four most common are: verse by verse, thematic, narrative, and topical.

Verse-by-Verse Preaching. This is the systematic reading and explanation of a biblical text, involving one book of Scripture and its piece-by-piece analysis. I quoted Mark Driscoll earlier because Mars Hill Church⁴ in Seattle is a well-known church that’s effectively reaching unchurched people in Seattle. The church Web site explains, “The beginning, the end, and everything in between. The Bible defines Mars Hill.”⁵ The site lists recent messages from Pastor Mark Driscoll and other teaching pastors including text and MP3 files of each message. Recent messages include studies of Song of Solomon, Romans, Jonah, and other Scripture texts.

Thematic Expository (or Doctrinal) Preaching. Thematic preaching is an excellent form for preaching Bible doctrine. The speaker can focus on

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everyday topics by expounding on a specific biblical text. The pastor can focus on Bible sayings on any relevant subject by a careful study and exposition of relevant biblical passages.

Thematic expository preaching generally appears in a sermon series over several weeks and introduces many Scriptures focused on the same theme. Thematic messages may include as many as ten or twelve Scripture passages in each sermon. Since the Bible tends to provide teachings on themes dispersed through different books, this form of preaching is a good way to preach the “whole counsel of God.” This method also introduces new believers or unschooled unbelievers to general themes and patterns that appear throughout the Bible.

For example, Darrin Patrick at The Journey, a new church in St. Louis, has been preaching on themes of love and marriage, drawing from the Song of Solomon and other biblical texts. The focus is what the Bible teaches about those themes, and the source for that is the Scripture, not his opinions or preferences. His messages are available at www.journeyon.net.

Narrative Expository Preaching. Narrative preaching presents the biblical text in the form of story and follows that story to completion. A narrative sermon functions as a lengthy illustration that uses a biblical text as its beginning and end.

When using this form, the speaker shares a story from the gospel such as the account of Jesus and the Samaritan woman (John 4). In telling the story, the preacher asks the listener to join in the narrative. As a result, the listener sees the fullness of Jesus’ words and teachings. This type of expository preaching can be highly effective in postmodern North American culture, which has rejected most of our traditional approaches.

Some time ago I discovered the value of narrative preaching during a church-starting crusade in West Africa. Although I believed I had preached a great message on the first night of a crusade, I found that the nationals had not connected with my verse-by-verse exposition of Luke 14.

On the second night I adapted my style to use narrative exposition of the Nicodemus story from John 3. Those in attendance responded to the unfolding story with enthusiastic applause at key points. Their excitement grew. When I told of Nicodemus’s presence at the foot of Jesus’ cross, the crowd exploded with joy. Many responded to the gospel invitation that night. More than one hundred attended the first service of the new church.

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Narrative preaching will grow more popular in the coming years. This is good news as long as the narratives remain consistent with biblical texts. Jesus demonstrated the value of narrative preaching by his use of parables.

Topical Expository Preaching. Of the four forms of exposition, I recommend this form the least. Its weakness grows out of the limits of time and the speaker's inability to include enough biblical text about the topic in one sermon. Although I discourage this form, it's helpful at times.

Topical exposition generally revolves around one passage, centering on one theme. It is topical because it's usually a single message on a single subject. It's expository, because it uses the biblical text as its source.

Most preachers use this form on special occasions such as Mother's Day, Father's Day, and Easter, but topical preaching does not provide adequate time to address the whole counsel of God as other methods do. Topical preaching limits opportunities for presenting proper understandings of the context as opposed to verse-by-verse preaching. In addition, the topical approach does not offer the opportunity to use the graphic and powerful images of narrative preaching. The church planter will probably use topical exposition, but it should be used sparingly.

Application

Any good message starts with the primary question: What's the purpose of the sermon?⁶ If people find the purpose interesting, they will listen. Pastors often don't answer the questions people are dying to ask or resolve because of what's going on in their personal lives. The pastor may be preaching on the benefits of the Old Testament law while a woman in the pew is wondering if her marriage will last. The pastor may be explaining the importance of the chiasma in Philippians while a husband is considering an adulterous relationship.

The pastor needs to answer the questions that people are asking and answer them in a way that influences people's lives. The sermon should be biblically sound first—and then mnemonically effective, visually stimulating, and encouraging.

Mnemonically Effective. The most effective sermons are those that are simple and easy to remember. Paul provides some examples. Pithy sayings can be effective. Each of the following Scripture passages can be readily quoted:

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“Bad company corrupts good character” (1 Cor. 15:33).

“For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6).

“If a man will not work, he shall not eat” (2 Thess. 3:10).

“Don’t you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?” (1 Cor. 5:6).

Visually Stimulating. Paul used illustrations from many sources, including athletics and the military.⁷ These were appropriate because they were from the world in which he lived. Illustrations are essential. Good messages have memorable illustrations.⁸

Encouraging. Paul had no difficulty in appealing to the emotions of his hearers.⁹ Chris Seay, now pastor of Ekklesia¹⁰ in Houston, explained how he shared his struggles with honesty and transparency. He wanted to show others that they could make it if he could: “Basically, my preaching style is to get up in front of them and say: ‘This is where God “beat me up in the Word” this week, and this is an area where I have sinned.’”¹¹

Instead of trying to amaze congregations with the use of primary sources and exegetical methods, a wiser course is to share personal shortcomings and struggles as you explain the text.¹² This is where genuineness comes into play.

Paul was not considered a great orator. Much has been written about this topic, and it seemed to be a great weakness of the apostle Paul.¹³ Delivery hardly seemed to be of great importance to the spread of the gospel. It was said of him, “His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing” (2 Cor. 10:10). But Paul’s heart was always open. He derived his speaking authority from his genuineness and broken nature.

Shaped by the Listener

I remember sitting in a well-known church after a national tragedy. The pastor did not mention or address what was on everyone’s mind—why do such things happen? Instead, he continued through his text as he had planned months before. He failed to take into account the needs of the listener.

The Scriptures model a different paradigm. For example, Paul varied his message depending on the needs and spiritual conditions of the listeners. The chart below illustrates his changing style:

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Text	Place	Audience	Approach
Acts 13:15–41	Antioch of Pisidia	Interested Jews	Much history and Hebrew Scripture
Acts 14:15–17	Lystra	Idolaters	Nature is a bridge to the gospel
Acts 17:22–31	Athens	Educated philosophers	Quotes a Stoic poet and acknowledges their religious quest
Acts 22:3–21	Jerusalem	Mob of Jews	Gives a personal testimony

Conclusion

When a new church is launched, the messages won't tend to be as deep as they might be in the future. In the beginning stage of a new church, the sermons should be more like what Larry Moyer defines as an evangelistic sermon—a message with a sharper focus, an awareness of the biblical illiteracy of the audience, less work with the text, simple organizational structure, revealing of life, filled with illustrations, and humorous.¹⁴ Good preaching in a new church will eventually evolve into a more thoroughly biblical yet practical preaching. Some have called this “life-situation preaching.”¹⁵

We must not only stay immersed in the Word, but we also must study the culture in order to understand the people to whom we preach.¹⁶ The most effective form of preaching in emerging churches is not trendy and culturally driven. Instead, it is holding up the Word of God as the source of truth and allowing the listener to be challenged and shaped by it. We don't have to talk them into anything or convince them that the Bible makes sense; instead, we can share the Bible as authoritative and allow them to decide whether to accept it.

Calvin Miller explained that the purpose of the sermon is not education; it's encounter with God.¹⁷ I hope I can lead people into that encounter while remaining faithful to the Word of God. My desire is to be able to repeat the words of John Calvin: “I have not corrupted one single passage of Scripture, nor twisted it as far as I know. . . . I have always studied to be simple.”¹⁸ Preaching in our age, as in any age, needs to be biblical preaching. Styles of delivery should change, but we still must “preach the Word.” It is good news that more and more congregations are rediscovering the value of biblical preaching.

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A school of thought emerged in the 1990s—in order to reach the lost you had to water down the biblical content. Ralph Moore explains: “We at Hope Chapel sometimes take a little heat for our bibliocentric approach. One time a delegation from another congregation visited my church. As soon as I asked people to open their Bibles to the text for the evening, these people began rolling their eyes and punching each other in the ribs. Later I discovered they were young pastors in training. They had been taught that it is not sensitive to the unchurched to use the Bible in church.”¹⁹

If you don’t know where I stand on this issue by now, I’ll be more direct: *The only message you have is Christ and the Bible*. Downplaying the prominence of that message for any reason is a dangerous compromise. You can reach out to the unchurched and still be honest about your message and the Book that contains that message.

My friend John Mark Clifton shared this with me, and I thought it an appropriate ending for this chapter:

I give each of the church planters with whom I work a copy of Piper’s book, *The Passion of Jesus*. It contains fifty messages on the power and meaning of the cross. Here is the deal: the cross is enough. It is enough to save, to heal, to give hope, to give peace, to give joy, to overcome discouragement. I tell my guys that you don’t have to teach your people everything, but they do need to know, to believe, and to live as though the cross is enough. Get to the cross in every message. It is not only about salvation, it is about life, struggle, victory, and sacrifice; and it is missing in most church planter preaching.²⁰

Resources for Further Reading

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Sermon materials on the www.pastors.com Web site.

www.preachingplus.com.

www.sermoncentral.com.