



In Defense Of Preaching

Part 3: The Work Of Preaching

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Preaching is hard work. Anyone who suggests otherwise has never preached. True preaching is an exacting and demanding task that must consume the whole man. One preacher likened the preaching ministry to the relationship between a moth and a flame. The moth feels inexorably drawn to the flame and wants to draw closer, but finds the closer it goes, the more that flame will cost him, ultimately consuming everything.

That is much like the romance of preaching that draws the preacher. He feels compelled to pursue and give himself to the task, but at last he finds that the closer he gets, the more he must give. It is hard work.

In Part 1 of this series, I listed four factors that I believe contribute to the church's (particularly the pastors') abandonment of biblical preaching. I lay the blame wholly at the feet of church leaders who have a deficient view of Scripture, a weak view of authority, an ignorance of the nature of biblical preaching, or who engage in a sinful rebellion of unwillingness to follow the biblical mandate to preach the Word.

To that list of factors which contribute to the pathetic state of preaching in our day, I must add one more: lazy preachers.

The goal of a faithful pastor is not ease but exactness. He cannot be content to skirt by with the least possible amount of work and effort in study. On the contrary, he is called to "**work hard at preaching and teaching**" (1 Timothy 5:17).

Unfortunately, pastoral ministry is viewed today as a desirable occupation that offers a flexible schedule, freedom from oversight, little work, and the comforts of

a white collar job. That perception attracts lazy men who approach the Bible and the discipline of study and sermon preparation with an endemic slothfulness.

It Is Demanded

I have argued that having a high view of Scripture necessitates a commitment to **expository** preaching.¹ Since we believe that God has spoken, and still speaks, through the text of Scripture, then we **must** be committed to understand and then to clearly, accurately, faithfully, and diligently explain the text.

The preacher, then, must know what the text says. He must study that text with a passionate commitment to accuracy and an exactness which exceeds that of the most skilled surgeon.

A faithful preacher does not want to be guilty of putting words in God's mouth. Nor does he want to be guilty of *not* speaking that which God has spoken and thus failing to "**declare the whole purpose of God**" (Acts 20:27).

The preacher with a high view of Scripture will not be sloppy in his study or slothful in his preparation. He will put forth the most strenuous effort to give the preaching of the Word all the attention, emphasis, focus, and effort that such a high calling demands.

The Work of the Study

I stopped in to fill up my thermos with coffee on my

¹ For more on this, consult Part 2 of this series titled, "In Defense of Preaching: The Theology Behind Preaching" available on our website at www.kootenaichurch.org.

way to the office and I ran into a friend at a gas station. He asked curiously, "So where are you headed today?"

I said, "I'm headed to my study."

"What are you doing today?"

Matter-of-factly, I replied, "I'm studying for Sunday. I'm working on my sermon."

"Speaking of that," he said, "I have always wondered, how much time does it take for you to prepare a sermon?"

"Well, it varies by a couple hours from week to week, but on average it takes about thirty to thirty-five hours a week for sermon preparation."

"Thirty hours!" he said incredulously. "You are kidding me! I would never have thought that."

To be honest with you, I wasn't sure how to take his undiminished astonishment. Immediately I realized that what he said was either a devastating insult or an unparalleled compliment.

It was possible that he meant something like, "Thirty hours! You spend thirty hours preparing that drivel? Judging from what I hear in your sermon, I wouldn't have guessed you put any preparation at all into that dog's breakfast. Whatever effort you put forth, it certainly doesn't show in the pulpit." That would be a devastating insult.

Or, it may be that he meant, "Thirty hours! Wow! You are so gifted and make it look so natural, that I would never have guessed that you had to work that hard at preparing. You seem to be so familiar with your material and so natural that I thought it didn't take any effort for you at all!"

I was a bit stunned at his reaction and still don't know to this day how I should interpret his astonishment.

In homiletics class at Bible college, we were told that the **rule of thumb** for preaching is: **for every minute you preach, you spend an hour in preparation.**

I was shocked when reading John Stott's book on preaching to see him recommend Bonhoeffer's standard - "*twelve hours' work on a sermon is a good general rule.*"² Stott went on to explain, "*I think that*

beginners will need ten to twelve hours and that experienced preachers are not likely to reduce this to less than half. A useful rule of thumb is that one needs at least one hour's preparation for every five minutes preached."³

I have given up hope of every achieving Stott's rule of thumb. Perhaps I am less effective than others, less efficient, not as quick, or not as bright. I doubt if I will ever be able to get my weekly time commitment down to less than twenty-five hours. In the early years of my pastoral ministry my sermon preparation took me over forty hours, and usually closer to fifty. At the time, my sermons averaged twenty minutes each!

But with experience comes efficiency. Now I find myself able to reap far more fruit from my study and preparation in less time. Now I live by the guideline given in Bible college: an hour of prep for every minute of preaching.

Even with this, every week is different. Some sermons almost write themselves. It seems that the text yields its gems with little or no resistance. The outline falls together with the ease of a child's puzzle. The sermon takes no effort to write. It all just flows together with such simplicity that one wonders how anyone could call this work. Those weeks are rare, very rare, but welcome.

Other weeks are a struggle. Every step of the process takes far longer than expected. The whole endeavor is like pushing a train uphill. Thirty-five hours will pass by in a heartbeat with still half the work left to be done. It is such an agonizing process that one wonders why anyone in their right mind would start it!

Every week is different, but the average is one hour of preparation for every minute of preaching.

I am convinced that it is necessary. "*The great preachers who have influenced their generation have all borne witness to the need for conscientious preparation. You might not think so as you listen to them. For as the sermon proceeds, it all sounds deceptively simple. The opening of the text, its illustration and application, the straightforward outline, the framing of sentences and choice of words - what*

² *Between Two Worlds* by John Stott (Grand Rapids: William B.

Eerdmans), pg. 259.
³ *Ibid.*

could be easier? Yet behind it lies a lifetime's discipline and industry."⁴ It is necessary not so that the preacher can be made much of, but in order that he be prepared to "**preach the Word**" (2 Timothy 4:1-5).

Spurgeon declared that "*habitually to come into the pulpit unprepared is unpardonable presumption.*"⁵ What would you think of a surgeon who did not spend time studying the condition of his patient before rushing headlong into an operation? Would you want to pay for a lawyer who entered a court to defend his client without having prepared the case? How much more the one who speaks the "**oracles of God**" (1 Peter 4:11).

This preparation is hard work.

The Process of Sermon Preparation

Good preaching requires exacting preparation. I have found that most of those who sit in the pew have no idea what goes into preparing a sermon, and likewise many of those who stand in the pulpit suffer from the same ignorance.

So I offer to you the following glimpse into the process of sermon preparation in hopes that this will further your understanding of what the task of preaching is all about. From week to week, the amount of time and effort spent on these individual steps may vary. Some texts present interpretive challenges that must be dealt with. Some are very straightforward and offer no resistance to the crafting of a good sermon.

This is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment of this subject, but a very brief overview of what the preparation process looks like for those committed to exposition. I am well aware that entire books have been written on each individual step. Obviously what I offer here is in **no way** exhaustive, or even thorough.

Biblical preaching begins with the text. A text is chosen. I choose to preach through entire Bible books in a consistent fashion, taking the next sentence, verse, or paragraph in the book. I abhor the hen-pecking approach of taking a verse from a different book every week. Taking an isolated text from a different passage each week communicates to the listener that the Bible

is a mere collection of unrelated fragments with no common theme or unifying argument to its structure. I am committed to preaching the Bible the same way it was written: a book at a time.⁶

Next, the text must be studied along with the context in which the text is found. Studying a passage is a long and arduous but rewarding task. The passage and its surrounding context should be read dozens of times during the preparation process. The purpose of studying the passage is to determine its meaning so that that meaning can be clearly communicated as the central idea of the sermon.

The sermon must then be written. Some pastors do this as a brief outline, others a more extensive outline. I prefer to manuscript every message. This results in fourteen to sixteen pages of text where every explanation, illustration, quote, story is written out just as I envision myself speaking it.

Lastly, the manuscript is reviewed a number of times. I have to read through my manuscript a few times on Saturday night before bed. Then I review the sermon many more times on Sunday morning before the worship service.

I don't take this manuscript into the pulpit with me. In fact, I believe that preaching without any notes is ideal. This, of course, requires even more preparation, since the preacher cannot refer to an outline, notes, or a manuscript throughout the sermon. He must put forth the effort to be so familiar with his message that he can declare it without notes.

Many preachers reading this are *screaming* right now: "Hey! You made a whole lot of work sound far too simple!" Indeed I did. I am only sketching the process.

Here is what I want you to notice: everything about the process is geared to discover the meaning of the text (what God has said) and then to prepare the sermon in such a way as to allow that text to speak for itself. In that way, and in that way only, the voice of God is heard in the Word of God. The text is King!

Now compare that to what passes for preaching in

⁴ Ibid. 213.

⁵ Ibid. 212.

⁶ It is acceptable to deviate from this pattern when a special need arises or when preaching on a particular theme for a holiday like Christmas or Easter. However, this should be the exception rather than the rule.

many pulpits in our land. The pastor does not select a passage, but a theme, a topic, or a felt need. I have seen sermon series designed around movie themes (like a Star Wars theme, or Summer Block Buster series), 80s Music Groups, and Sit-Coms. I attended a church one fall where the pastor preached a series around a football theme. He wore a jersey, and crafted the messages to use life lessons from the game of football. Of course the principles were tied (however loosely) to Bible verses. I guess this in some way *Christianizes* the message.

This philosophy of preaching begins **not with the text** but by asking the question, "What do *I* want to say?" The preacher then prepares what *he* wants to say. He compiles his illustrations, anecdotes, supporting quotes, stories, poems, jokes, and, in many churches, a video clip.

Oh! And let's not forget a Bible verse or two. After all, we are a "church." This, however, does nothing more than baptize the preacher's thoughts and words in Biblical jargon. The Bible is treated as merely another source for quotes, stories, and principles that the preacher is free to use as a resource to support his ideas. Remember where he began: "What do I want to say?"

I was in one service where Henry Ford, Donald Trump and Jesus were all quoted one right after the other, as if they were peers. One is left to conclude that Jesus had at least as much wisdom and insight into life as Henry Ford.

This philosophy of preaching views the Bible as just another great resource for material. Biblical preaching --exposition--treats the Bible not as **a source** for material, but as **the message itself**.

The Path Less Taken

There are two ways to approach preaching. One requires the hard work of study, precision in handling the text, accuracy in understanding, interpretation, and theology in order to allow the text to speak for itself through the sermon. The other presents moralist, self-help, life improvement, positive-thinking speech birthed in the heart, mind, and will of the speaker, sprinkled with quotes from numerous sources, including the

Bible.

Biblical preaching displays the meaning of a biblical text to the audience so they can understand the text. The other offers no text to be understood, because no text is explained. It is only briefly referenced.

One allows the voice of God to be heard in the text. The other consists of the voice of a mere man.

One begins with the **text of Scripture**. The other begins with the **thoughts of the preacher**.

Biblical preaching is hard work. It is far easier for the preacher to make the Bible serve his purposes and support his ideas than it is for the preacher to serve the text.

In biblical preaching, the preacher is only a **servant** of the **text**. The text determines not only the content of the message, but the outline, the illustrations, the applications, and the manner of preaching. The preacher and the sermon must **serve** the Scriptures.

In the other method of preaching, the Bible serves the desires, ideas, agenda, whims, and fancies of the preacher. It is always easier to be served than to serve. This does not demand the hard work of study. It merely requires an internet connection and market savvy creativity.

Men are straying away from biblical preaching not because it is ineffective. It is not. Biblical preaching - exposition - is tremendously effective! They are straying from biblical preaching not because the Bible is silent on what a sermon should be. It is not. They are leaving biblical preaching not because expository preaching is outmoded, antiquated, and too Victorian - it is not! How can hearing God speak through His Word ever be passé?

Unfaithful men are departing from biblical preaching because it is **hard work**.⁷ It is far less work to use the Bible to serve their purpose than it is to make their purpose the Bible's. Men would rather make their ideas King and the Word of God their servant than make the text of Scripture King and make themselves and their sermons its servant.

⁷ This is no the **only** reason that unfaithful men have abandoned Biblical preaching (see part 1 of this series), but this is a critical element.

The preacher and the sermon must always serve the text, never the other way around.

A Call To Hard Work

It is all too easy in our day for preachers to feign work. There are thousands of ready-made sermons, complete with all the supporting quotes and illustrations, available online. It is common for pastors to swap material and preach each other's sermons. This travesty is not only plagiarism, it is powerless, pragmatic, and lazy shepherding.

Spurgeon said, *"We are all too much occupied with taking care of ourselves; we shun the difficulties of excessive labor. And frequently behind the entrenchment of taking care of our constitution, we do not half as much as we ought. A minister of God is bound to spurn the suggestions of ignoble ease, it is his calling to labor; and if he destroys his constitution, I, for one, only thank God that He permits us the high privilege of so making ourselves living sacrifices."*

Let those of us who teach and preach "**labor and strive**" (Col. 1:29) so that we might "**fully carry out the preaching of the Word of God**" (Col. 1:25).

Without Wax -

