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INVITATION TO THEOLOGICAL STUDIES SERIES

INVITATION TO
BIBLICAL
PREACHING

*Proclaiming Truth with
Clarity and Relevance*

DONALD R. SUNUKJIAN

 **Kregel**
Academic & Professional

*Invitation to Biblical Preaching: Proclaiming Truth with Clarity
and Relevance*

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To
my wife, Nell,
who somehow has convinced me she'd
rather hear me preach than anyone else;

my children,
Peter, David, Sarah, Mary, and Esther,
any one of whom could delight me
after a church service with,
"Good sermon, Dad"; and

Haddon Robinson,
early mentor and continuing friend.

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– Introduction –

An Invitation to Biblical Preaching

AFTER PREACHING ONE SUNDAY morning, a man asked me, “Don, how do you see yourself when you’re up there preaching? What’s your self-image? Do you see yourself as an evangelist? A teacher? A ‘kerux’? (I think he knew a little Greek and was showing off.) How do you see yourself?”

I’d never considered that question before, but within a split second I instinctively answered, “I see myself standing with you, under the Word of God, saying, ‘Look at what God is saying to us.’”

In my mind’s eye, I saw myself as standing, not over the congregation, but among them, holding open a Bible, showing its pages to them, saying, “This is God’s Word—inspired, inerrant, authoritative. It tells us what we need to know—what to think, how to act, what’s ahead. It gives us truth. Isn’t it wonderful? It’s what God is saying to us! He’s already said it to me; I’ve already received the benefit from it as I’ve studied and prepared. And now I’m simply sharing it with you—Look at what God is saying to us!”

As I’ve reflected over the years on that spur-of-the-moment answer, it has struck me that this is, at heart, the definition of a “biblical preacher”—one who says, “Look at what God is saying . . . to us.”

The Bible is God’s voice, spanning the ages. The role of the biblical preacher is to echo that voice in this generation. Specifically, the preacher’s task is twofold:

- to present the true and exact meaning of the biblical text (“Look at what God is saying . . .”)

- in a manner that is relevant to the contemporary listener (“... to us”).

THE TRUE AND EXACT MEANING

“To present the true and exact meaning of the biblical text” means the sermon must unfold according to the natural flow of thought of the biblical author. If Isaiah were listening to a sermon from his writings, he should be thinking to himself, “Yes, that’s what I was saying, and that’s how it fits this crowd.” But if Isaiah hears the sermon, shakes his head, and says, “What? No! No!” the preacher is in trouble. Biblical preaching takes great pains to present the ideas and sequence of thought of the inspired biblical author.

A true biblical preacher, for example, would not preach the story of David and Goliath as revealing “six characteristics of a future leader”:

- Curious—asking, “What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine?”
- Consistent—asking others the same question after his brother rebukes him.
- Courageous—offering to Saul, “Your servant will go and fight him.”
- Careful—taking off Saul’s armor because he is not used to it.
- Confident—announcing to Goliath, “This day the Lord will hand you over.”
- Conclusive—cutting off Goliath’s head with the sword.

Surely the original author did not have such a list in mind when he sat down to write his account!¹

Instead, the preacher’s study of 1 Samuel 17 within the historical flow of the Old Testament would observe the following:

1. Such preaching is poor communication—and worse theology. First, “asking others the same question” is not being consistent, it’s being persistent. (But the speaker is stuck with his c’s.) Second, it’s highly debatable whether consistency is a true characteristic of a leader. A business owner in the audience might argue, “If I consistently ran my business the same way I did a decade ago, without changing or adapting, I’d be broke.” Finally, it’s also theologically debatable whether confidence is a true leadership characteristic. Certain leaders in Scripture resolved to act a certain way even though they had no confidence as to what God would do (e.g., Daniel’s three friends who informed Nebuchadnezzar that, whether God rescued them or not, they would not bow to his image of gold [Dan. 3:16–18]). Such a sermon—six alliterated c’s of leadership—is not God’s truth but rather the speaker’s artificial creation.

- David continually refers to Goliath as “this uncircumcised Philistine,” emphasizing the fact that Goliath has no covenant right to the land.
- Goliath is from the city of Gath, a Philistine city that should have been defeated by the tribe of Judah years earlier. In Judges 1, God picked the tribe of Judah to set the example for the other tribes: by trusting God’s covenant promises they would be able to conquer their allotted territories. But Judah, the chosen leader, faltered in faith, defeating only three of the Philistine cities in its territory. Gath was allowed to remain. And now Gath, in the form of Goliath, has come back to trouble Israel.
- But now a young boy from the tribe of Judah steps forward to do what his tribe did not do, because he believes what his tribe did not believe—that God would be true to his covenant promise and that the land would belong to Israel alone. And thus this boy becomes the leader his tribe was supposed to be, prefiguring the coming “Lion of Judah” who will rule God’s people forever.

In this way the expositor, by being true to the meaning of the original author, is able to preach the real point of the passage: “Only those who believe God’s Word are qualified to lead God’s people.”

RELEVANT TO THE CONTEMPORARY LISTENER

This true and exact meaning must then be presented in a manner that is relevant to the contemporary listener. God is revealing truth, not simply to a previous generation, but also to us, right now, right where we live. God intends his Scriptures to span the centuries, addressing each generation in its immediate context.

When the Pharisees challenged Jesus as to why he was allowing his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1–2), he replied, “Haven’t you read what David did when . . . ?” (v. 3). In Jesus’ mind, God was giving them the answer to their question through an incident recorded a thousand years earlier.

Similarly, Paul, referring to the historical events of Exodus and Numbers, says, “These things . . . were written down as warnings for us” (1 Cor. 10:11). Through accounts written 1,500 years earlier, God was speaking to Gentiles in Paul’s day—and to us, now.

A biblical message is not so much, “This is what God said then,” as it is, “This is what God is saying now, to you.” The purpose of the sermon is not to impart knowledge but to influence behavior—not to inform but to transform. The goal is not to make listeners more educated but more Christlike.

When you come, for example, to Genesis 11–12—Abraham’s leaving Ur of the Chaldeans for Canaan—you would not be content to simply “teach” the various details of the passage:

- Ur as a commercial and religious center of the ancient Sumerian culture.
- Abraham’s trip up the Euphrates River.
- His stay in Haran until the death of his father, Terah.
- His resumed journey to Canaan.
- His travels down the central mountain ridge, building altars and worshipping wherever he goes.

At the end of all this biblical information, the listener thinks to himself, “So what? The man’s been dead for four thousand years. What do I care? Why are you telling me this?”

In genuine biblical preaching, you would go on to say, “The reason I’m telling you this is because God may come to some of you and say the same thing he said to Abraham, ‘Leave what is known and familiar, and come with me. Let go of what is comfortable and secure, and follow me without knowing what I will put in its place.’”

Then you would draw pictures of what this contemporary “leaving” might look like for your listeners:

- Leaving the familiarity of American culture for an overseas ministry.
- Leaving the comfort of family and friends to go to college in another state or to take a job in another city.
- Leaving the security of a guaranteed paycheck and benefits to start your own business.
- Leaving a circle of teenage friends who are a bad influence on you.
- Leaving the familiarity of singleness for the uncertainties of marriage.

To preach in a manner that is relevant to the contemporary listener is to impress on the listener, “God is saying something today. He didn’t just say it long ago. He’s saying it now, to us, right where we live.”

TEXTUAL, TOPICAL, OR EXPOSITORY?

When talking about this kind of biblical preaching, the old distinctions of textual, topical, and expository are not helpful. Those distinctions were based on the amount of biblical material being used, or where it was being drawn from—a single verse (textual), passages from different biblical books (topical), or sequential paragraphs through a particular book (expository).

Today, instead, we define true biblical preaching by how the biblical material is treated—that is, faithful to the meaning and flow of the original author and relevant to the contemporary listener.

Any of the above approaches—textual, topical, expository—can be a biblical message. A biblical textual sermon, based on 1 Timothy 5:1a (“Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father”), might look like this:

- I. We are not to harshly rebuke an older man
 - A. “Harshly rebuke” means . . .
 - B. In our experience, a harsh rebuke might be something like:
 1. Example
 2. Example
 3. Example
 - C. The reason we are not to harshly rebuke older men is because . . .

- II. Instead, we should appeal to him, or exhort him, as if he were our father
 - A. The difference between an appeal and a rebuke is . . .
 - B. In the examples above, an appeal might sound something like:
 1. Example
 2. Example
 3. Example
 - C. The significance of viewing him as our father is that . . .

A textual sermon like this is true biblical preaching—the speaker unfolds the author’s flow of thought in a short text (here, two-thirds of a verse), making his concepts clear, believable, and relevant to the contemporary listener.

Similarly, topical preaching can be true biblical preaching. A topical sermon on being a Christian husband might look like this:

- I. Be considerate as you live with your wife (1 Peter 3:7).
 - A. In the original language, the words “live with” look at the most intimate aspects of life, including sexual intimacy.
 - B. To be “considerate” means to act in an understanding and knowledgeable way in this intimate relationship.
 - C. “Considerate living” in our marriages might take many forms.
 1. Example
 2. Example
 3. Example

- II. Love your wife as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:25).
 - A. Christ’s love for the church was such that he gave himself up for her.
 - B. In a husband’s life, such sacrificial love might take many forms.
 1. Example
 2. Example
 3. Example

Such a topical sermon is genuine biblical preaching—it accurately explains each passage according to its biblical context and applies the truths to everyday life.

THE HARDEST AND BEST THING WE WILL EVER DO

This book is an invitation to biblical preaching. We’ll talk about how to determine the true and exact meaning of the biblical author. And we’ll talk about how to present that meaning in a clear, believable, and relevant way to the contemporary listener.

Such preaching is the hardest and best thing we will ever do.

It's the hardest, for it will take the most rigorous mental ability and discipline God has given us. We will find ourselves tempted to do anything but the hard study required—we'll schedule meetings, arrange counseling appointments, tackle administrative tasks, clean our fingernails, find a sermon on the Internet, or settle for some superficial approach to our passage—anything to avoid the sheer labor required.

For a man, preaching is probably as close as he will ever come to giving birth. He'll go through the same "labor": "There's something growing inside of me. It's getting larger. It wants to come out. Oh, it's so hard to get it out . . . Aaaugh! . . . It's done; it's over! . . . Tell me that's the prettiest baby you've ever seen!" (And the next day, he has the "postpartum blues"!)

It's the hardest thing we will ever do, but it's also the best. It's the best thing we can do for our ministries. Good preaching does the following:

- It enables us to reach more people in less time with God's truth, since it occurs at the largest gathering of the church.
- It allows us to say things honestly, and sometimes bluntly, knowing that someone, in the anonymity of a crowd, will ponder and receive our words, whereas that person might angrily reject them if said face-to-face.
- It builds our credibility for our other pastoral (e.g., counseling) and leadership (e.g., church board) activities.
- It is usually the initial point of contact that encourages visitors to return.
- It brings excitement and anticipation to the whole church.

Biblical preaching is the best thing we can do for our ministries, and it's the best thing we can do for our own personal lives. To drink deeply of the Word of God, to saturate ourselves with its truths, to have our lives changed by its transforming power, and then to stand before God's people, proclaiming with joy and confidence, "Look at what God is saying to us!"—who could be called to anything greater?

Part One

“LOOK AT WHAT
GOD IS SAYING . . .”

– 1 –

Study the Passage

THE FIRST STEP IN PREPARING a biblical message is to study the passage. This large step breaks down into several stages:

- Read the surrounding context for an overview.
- Flag the things you don't fully understand.
- Use your skills and resources in the original languages.
- Consult good commentaries.

READ THE SURROUNDING CONTEXT FOR AN OVERVIEW

First, read your specific passage and its surrounding context in several different translations in order to get the author's broad flow of thought. Determine how your unit fits into his unfolding sequence of ideas.

For example, suppose you're going to preach on James 1:5–8:

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

If you fail to note the flow of thought in James 1, you might be tempted to preach things very different than what James had in mind. You might find yourself applying James 1:5–8 to a variety of situations:

- A teenager wanting to know what college he should attend
- A young woman needing to decide which suitor to encourage
- A mother wanting wisdom on dealing with a problem child
- A widow needing direction on how to handle her finances
- A husband weighing a job change

Or, you might preach James 1:19—“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry”—as “Advice for Parents of Teenagers” or “Guidelines for Lay Counselors” or “How to Be a Man of Discernment.”

But as you read the entire chapter several times through in different translations, you realize that throughout the chapter James is talking about what you should do “whenever you face trials of many kinds” (v. 2). His flow of thought is as follows:

- You should face trials with joy and persevere through them, knowing they’re producing maturity and Christlike completeness in you (vv. 2–4).
- If you lack wisdom regarding the purpose of the trial or how to persevere through it, ask God, and he’ll give it to you. But you must firmly believe in his sovereignty and love in order to receive it (vv. 5–8).
- Both poor and rich ought to be able to discern the purposes and benefits that come through their trials (vv. 9–11).
- If you successfully persevere through the trial, you’ll receive the crown of life (v. 12).
- But if you respond sinfully to the trial, don’t blame God for pushing you too far. Your sinful failure was due to some evil in you, not because God was tempting you (vv. 13–15).
- God never pushes us toward sin. On the contrary, his every action is only and always for our good—from his initial choice to give us birth to his final welcoming of us in heaven as the highest of all his creation (vv. 16–18).
- Therefore, don’t become angry with God or blame him if you respond sinfully in a trial. Instead, “be quick to listen” to the wisdom you asked for and to the “word of truth” within you. Be “slow to speak”—do not accuse God or others of causing you to sin. And

finally, be “slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.” An angry, accusatory response will never bring the maturity or completeness or crown of life that God intends through the trial (vv. 19–20).

- Instead of being angry and blaming God, get rid of whatever filth or evil caused you to react sinfully in the first place, and then return to the Word of God, which is able to guide you safely through the trial (v. 21).
- When you return to the Word, however, you must obey it, and not simply listen to it. You must be a “doer” and not merely a “hearer” (vv. 22–25).

By recognizing this flow of thought through James 1, you will then be able to preach the author’s true and exact meaning in verses 5 and 19.

FLAG THE THINGS YOU DON’T FULLY UNDERSTAND

Once you have a handle on the large flow of thought, you can then more thoroughly probe your specific passage, flagging things that are unclear to you: customs you don’t understand, logical connections that don’t make sense to you, a choice of wording that seems strange, apparent doctrinal difficulties, or anything else you need to pin down more precisely. In other words, you’re asking the questions that your subsequent study must answer before you can truly preach the meaning of the original author.

For example, in James 1:5–8 you might flag the following:

- Why does James assure me that God “won’t find fault”? I wouldn’t have thought that he would. If I’m praying and asking God for wisdom, I would think he’d be pleased. Why does James think I would be worried that God will find fault?
- When I ask God for wisdom, I must “believe.” Believe what? That God will give me wisdom? If I didn’t believe he would give me wisdom, I probably wouldn’t be asking him for it in the first place, would I? What must I believe? What should I not doubt?
- What does it mean to be “double-minded”? What are the two minds, or contrasting thoughts, that could be present?

As another example, suppose you're preparing a message on 1 Corinthians 4:1–5:

So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

From reading the preceding context (chap. 3), you observe that Paul is rebuking the Corinthians for their unworthy and unfounded infatuations with certain ministers. Then, in the passage you're going to preach on (4:1–5), he tells them how ministers should be regarded instead.

With this surrounding context in mind, you now probe the verses, noting things you don't fully understand, things you will need to get a handle on through your study before you can preach the passage accurately. You might flag the following:

- What are the “secret things of God”? Why would God have secrets? Other translations talk about the “mysteries of God.” Has God written whodunits? What are these mysteries, or secrets, and why would God have them?
- The NIV describes ministers as ones who are “entrusted” with something; the NASB calls them “stewards.” What does it mean to be “entrusted”? We have been given “a trust,” but what is it? What was a steward in that culture? Was it the same as in our culture—for example, an airplane hostess or a dispenser of wine on a ship? Or was it something different?
- There seems to be a slight adversarial relationship between Paul and his readers. Why is that? What in their previous history might have caused that?
- Paul says he cares “very little” about their opinion of him. What

does this do to our contemporary emphasis on small group accountability? It seems like Paul considers himself unaccountable.

- Paul says he doesn't even judge himself. Aren't we supposed to examine our lives to see if we're living worthy of the Lord? Doesn't Paul himself say a few chapters later that "a man ought to examine himself" before he participates in the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:28)? Is he being inconsistent?
- If, as Paul says, "my conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent," then what hope do I ever have of pleasing the Lord?
- Are we really to "judge nothing"? Don't other verses assume some judgment or discernment on our part that properly leads us to rebuke a sinning brother?
- When is the "appointed time"?
- When we get to heaven, is God going to display our entire lives through some cosmic video, revealing every secret sin and hidden thought for all of heaven to see? If not (and we hope not!), then what does it mean that "he will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts"?

The goal of your subsequent study is to get clear answers to these questions, so that when you speak, your message will confidently and accurately present what God is saying.

USE YOUR SKILLS AND RESOURCES IN THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGES

Once you have the larger flow of thought and have flagged specific things you don't fully understand, you're ready to begin an in-depth study of your passage, hopefully starting with the languages in which the original authors wrote.

Our abilities in the original languages differ, but to the extent that you are able, work your way through the passage in Greek or Hebrew, noting vocabulary, word order, structural connectors, and organizational designs (e.g., chiasmus, inclusio, parallelism).¹ Use whatever computer programs or language aids might help you.

Moving slowly through the material in Hebrew or Greek pays off in

1. See pages 70n. 5, 131n. 5, 140–41, 161–63, 182–91, and 247 for explanations and examples of these organizational designs.

many ways. First, by going slowly and saturating yourself in the text, you build the fire or passion you will eventually want when you preach. You begin to feel the power of the Word. It starts to seep into your soul.²

Second, looking up the original vocabulary in the lexicons gives you nuances of meaning that cannot be brought out in the single word or phrase of the English translation.

Third, the original languages contain aids to interpretation that may not be apparent in the English, such as word order to indicate emphasis, or syntactical observations to reveal the organization of thought (e.g., if participles are subordinate to an imperative in the Greek, they indicate the time, manner, means, cause, condition, concession, purpose, or result that attaches to the command being given).

Fourth, the original languages sometimes reveal an ambiguity that the English translators have interpretively resolved (e.g., whether the genitive is objective or subjective). While their resolution might be helpful and accurate, it might also reflect a doctrinal bias or at least an interpretative viewpoint that should be held tentatively until further study is done.

Finally, having the original languages in mind will prepare you to read the commentaries more intelligently and profitably. Your familiarity with the original words or phrases will enable you to immediately understand the points the commentators are making and prepare you for how they play off each other in their various viewpoints.

The three stages so far—reading the surrounding context, flagging what you don't understand, and going through it in the original languages—might take one to two hours, depending on the length of your chosen passage. The next stage will probably add four to six hours to this.

CONSULT GOOD COMMENTARIES

Good commentaries generally are found among those produced in the last few decades. Older works, perhaps in the public domain and therefore inexpensively available, have limited value. Though perhaps written by godly men or women, many are merely random devotional observations

2. That may be why God commanded the king “to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law” (Deut. 17:18). The king wasn't just to read someone else's copy; he had to personally and slowly write one out in longhand for himself—a process that would deeply embed the content in his soul.

without a grasp of the author's true meaning or flow of thought. Others, though written by competent scholars, are dated and lack the benefit of recent cultural, archeological, and grammatical studies.

We're all indebted to scholars who have spent their lives understanding the biblical languages and cultures. As we read and compare their insights, the biblical author's flow of thought begins to take definite shape, and our own understanding of the passage crystallizes further.

Good commentaries tend to fall in one of three categories. The first category is what we might call an expositional, or synthesis, commentary. This type of commentary, often an inexpensive paperback, is written for the intelligent English reader. Its goal is to present the flow of thought of the biblical writer, with some attention to individual words and phrases. This kind of commentary is often a good place to start, since it will quickly give you the large units of thought and the lines of argument of the text.

The second category is what we might call an exegetical, or critical, commentary. Usually in more expensive hardback, this type of commentary is the most detailed and scholarly. It focuses on words, phrases, and intricate issues of grammar and syntax and presents long discussions of culture and background. It has the best chance of resolving the study questions you flagged earlier.

The third category is the sermonic, or homiletic, commentary, which is usually a series of sermons that were first preached to a local congregation and then put into print for a wider audience. The value of this type of commentary is that it might spark applications, titles, special phrasings, or even a creative approach to the message.

Study thoroughly in the first two categories before you read the third. If you start with sermonic commentaries, you may be tempted to prematurely conclude, "That'll preach!" without first determining whether the printed sermon accurately reflects the meaning of the biblical author. Instead, start with the commentaries that have no homiletical ax to grind. Become emotionally wedded to the concepts and flow of the biblical author, and then you'll be more properly selective in how you benefit from someone else's sermon.

A wise preacher will budget money to buy these books. Just as the mechanic has to invest in the latest tools to diagnose complex engines, so you must have the best and latest books to keep up with advances in biblical knowledge and to stimulate your mind.

Stay abreast with what's being published. Two excellent resources are the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*³ and *Bibliotheca Sacra*.⁴ These two journals not only have consistently helpful articles on biblical passages and topics, but also valuable book reviews of the latest commentaries. Published quarterly, their yearly cost is about the price of a nice restaurant meal.

Other resources for commentary recommendations might be a booklist put out by the professors of a seminary, or a published work by a respected scholar evaluating recent works, or a book exclusively focused on how to build an evangelical theological library.⁵

To really stay on the cutting edge of New Testament and Old Testament studies, subscribe to *Old Testament Abstracts* and *New Testament Abstracts*.⁶ Modestly priced, these abstracts summarize almost every recent article pertaining to biblical studies that have appeared in hundreds of journals around the world and are an excellent way to stay current with emerging scholarship.

Your first and most essential step is to thoroughly study the passage. Spend the hours reading, taking notes, and learning all you can, so that you can say substantively, accurately, and confidently, "Look at what God is saying."

3. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 200 Russell Woods Drive, Lynchburg, VA 24502-3574.

4. *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 3909 Swiss Avenue, Dallas, TX 75204.

5. For helpful guidance, see John Glynn, *Commentary and Reference Survey: A Comprehensive Guide to Biblical and Theological Resources* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007).

6. *Old Testament Abstracts* and *New Testament Abstracts*, published three times a year by the Catholic University of America, 433 Caldwell Hall, Washington, DC 20064.