

# **PREACHING WITH Accuracy**

*Finding Christ-Centered Big Ideas  
for Biblical Preaching*



# PREACHING WITH Accuracy

*Finding Christ-Centered Big Ideas  
for Biblical Preaching*

RANDAL E. PELTON



**Kregel**  
Ministry

*Preaching with Accuracy: Finding Christ-Centered Big Ideas for Biblical Preaching*

© 2014 by Randal E. Pelton

Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc., 2450 Oak Industrial Dr. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49505-6020.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations in printed reviews.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ISBN 978-0-8254-4328-0

Printed in the United States of America

13 14 15 16 17 / 5 4 3 2 1

# CONTENTS

Introduction . . . . .	7
1. Does Exposition Still Work? . . . . .	17
2. Big Ideas or Small Ideas: Which Meaning Will You Communicate? . . . . .	27
3. Carefully Cut the Text . . . . .	41
4. Identifying the Textual Big Idea (texbi). . . . .	51
5. Identifying the Contextual Big Idea (conbi). . . . .	87
6. Canonical Interpretation: Preaching All Three Contexts . . . . .	111
7. How Our Findings Contribute to the Development of the Sermon . . . . .	151
Conclusion . . . . .	157
Bibliography . . . . .	159



# INTRODUCTION

This book presents a method for finding Christ-centered big ideas for biblical preaching, an ability that plays a major role in preaching with greater accuracy. You might recognize the titles of two, popular, homiletics textbooks in my title: Haddon Robinson's *Biblical Preaching* and Bryan Chapell's *Christ-Centered Preaching*.<sup>1</sup> Usually, these two approaches to preaching are not paired. This homiletical hybrid allows the selected passage of Scripture to control meaning, while also honoring Jesus' understanding of the unity of the Bible.<sup>2</sup> The method requires two skills.

- 
- 1 Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001). Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005).
  - 2 Cf., for instance, Luke 24:27: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." You can read more detailed analysis of this method of interpretation in Randal Emery Pelton, "Creatively Moving to the Cross: Adopting the Goal While Adjusting the Method of Early Christian Preaching," *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 12, no. 1 (2012). I am in agreement with Wilson who believes "Preachers need encouragement to shift their emphasis to preaching the gospel and away from preaching pericopes per se. Pericopes provide essential, irreplaceable windows to the gospel, and sometimes contain a fulsome expression of it, but rarely fully embody it themselves if treated in isolation from the rest of the biblical story." See Paul Scott Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*, Preaching

The first skill is the ability to identify the dominant meaning of a preaching portion. Here's where many of us get stuck. Many homileticians state that sermons need a unifying theme, but they do not show how to *find* those themes or big ideas.<sup>3</sup> The method I'm proposing attempts to provide preachers with tools to help them know where and how meaning resides in a preaching portion. This involves recognizing how genres communicate meaning.

The second skill is the ability to follow the language or concepts in a preaching portion to the gospel.<sup>4</sup> Having arrived at the gospel, the preacher is able to show how God-in-Christ-through-the-Spirit makes the preaching portion mean something for the Church. This method makes and maintains a vital connection between the meaning of the preaching portion and the gospel. Without this connection the preacher is not able to articulate how the preaching portion is true for Believers.

Experiences as a pastor, student, and professor led to the writing of this book. First, when I began preaching every weekend in 1991, I soon discovered that it was much easier to amass pages of notes on selected Scripture than to create a sermon. Armed with tools that training institutions gave me, I had no problem gathering pages of notes—biblical data, exegetical fragments. I had lots of notes, but no sermon; I had the jig, but not the saw.

Call it what you will: I was dizzy from Osborne's hermeneutical spiral,<sup>5</sup> accidentally fell off Stott's bridge,<sup>6</sup> or drowned in

---

and Its Partners (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2004), 157.

3 Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 41–43. See also Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 46–47.

4 I am using the term, "gospel," to describe the salvation package of Jesus living a perfect life, dying a substitutionary death for sinner, rising from the dead, ascending to the Father, and dispatching His Spirit on all who believe.

5 Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1991).

6 John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, 1st American ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1982).

Quicke's preaching swim.<sup>7</sup> I would think, "I understand much about this preaching portion, but I don't know how to preach it."<sup>8</sup> Later I discovered that a big part of my problem was I did not understand how the genre of my Text was communicating meaning and intention (what God intended the Text to do to us readers). This was especially true for certain types of literature found in the Bible, such as Old and New Testament narratives. I was much more comfortable—not necessarily more competent—in the practical sections of the New Testament epistles.

Second, in our first residency in Dr. Haddon Robinson's Doctor of Ministry track in preaching at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, guest lecturer Dr. Duane Litfin, encouraged us to "just get on the target." Our assignment was to locate the subject of a preaching portion as the first step to finding what Robinson refers to as the big idea.<sup>9</sup> We were missing all over the place and didn't know why. We didn't know what to look for. We didn't know how Scripture communicated its ideas. Since that moment I've been trying to figure out how to get closer to the bull's eye of meaning.

Third, I've noticed that many of the pastors I work with in my classes do not have a reliable method for finding dominant meaning in their selected preaching portions. As a result, they often focus on whatever seems most preachable. This creates the potential for sermons to major on minor concepts, which may result in distorted meaning and application. So, over the years I've been trying to help

---

7 Michael J. Quicke, *360-Degree Preaching: Hearing, Speaking, and Living the Word* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003).

8 Thompson laments: "In the seminary, the studies of preaching, theology, and biblical studies are compartmentalized into the domain of specialists in each area. When these subjects are treated as separate disciplines, the specialists are answerable primarily to other specialists, leaving the task of integration to the preacher, who has seen no model for integrating preaching with theological reflection." See James Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 108.

9 Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 33–50.

preachers allow the biblical writers to determine what should jump out at them as they read and study Scripture for sermons.

Finally, not long after beginning to preach, a missionary friend introduced me to Timothy Keller's preaching at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. The more I listened to Tim preach, the more I began to catch his Christ-centered hermeneutic that created Christ-centered sermons.<sup>10</sup> It was my first exposure to how the gospel makes Scripture function for the Church. I was hooked.

Since then, I have not entered a classroom where pastors and laypeople were not eager to explore this hermeneutic. Of course, some were and are skeptical. Like me, they had experienced a kind of Christ-centered interpretation that resulted in an entirely different meaning than the preaching portion. I continue to enjoy exposing preachers and teachers of the Bible to a method of interpretation and application that preserves the meaning of a preaching portion while honoring the unity of Scripture.

In a nutshell, that's how this book came about. Here's how it unfolds.

*Chapter 1* asks and answers a relevant question in a day when many pastors question the ability of expositional preaching to win the day. *Does accurate exposition work anymore?* There's no sense exploring how to preach with greater accuracy if the answer is "No." This chapter highlights 1 Corinthians 14:24–25 which demonstrates that God's Word aimed at Christians can effectively reach them and the non-Christians in church who enter and overhear our worship. One reason topical preaching enjoys popularity, especially among seeker-sensitive churches, is it is perceived to be more effective. First Corinthians 14:24–25 shows that an insider-directed message reaches both insiders and outsiders. This

---

<sup>10</sup> Tim once told me how much Chapell's book helped him. Tim's methodology, however, is a bit more extreme than Chapell's. Near the end of this book you'll see Keller's more extreme version explained and applied.

fact keeps me from abandoning through-the-Book exposition in favor of what is perceived to be a more relevant option.<sup>11</sup>

*Chapter 2* explores the difficulty that the presence of multiple meanings creates in preaching portions. Most preaching portions contain more than one idea. Preaching with greater accuracy requires discerning how those ideas interrelate to form meaning. All ideas in a pericope are not created equal. It is important to know whether you're preaching a big idea or little idea because this affects interpretation and application. It is especially important to consider what happens when we apply small ideas.

*Chapters 3–7* present a method for finding Christ-centered big ideas for biblical preaching. Chapter 3 explores how our choice of preaching portions affect meaning and application. It's possible to choose a preaching portion without a big idea. An example is Mark 8:22–26 which records Jesus healing a blind man in two stages. The narrative is designed to illustrate the gradually clearing vision of Jesus' disciples that is portrayed before and after the miracle. Mark 8:22–26 is an illustration of an idea developed in the surrounding context. Sometimes we choose preaching portions with multiple big ideas. This is often the case when preaching in the New Testament epistles. Some paragraphs, such as Hebrews 13:1–6, contain several disconnected instructions. Attempts to merge them into one theme are unsuccessful. So, where we cut the Text for preaching affects interpretation and application.

*Chapter 4* reveals how we recognize the various-sized ideas that exist in a preaching portion. The method involves discovering a

---

11 During the writing of this introduction, I was reading Barth's *Homiletics*. I was challenged and comforted to read: "The real need is not so much to get to the people as to come from Christ. Then one automatically gets to the people." Cf. Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 53.

broad subject, narrowed subject, and complement, which combine to form a textual big idea. This is the starting point for finding Christ-centered big ideas. The broad subject phase is a significant expansion of Robinson's method. I present genre clues for narrative, didactic, poetry (especially Psalms), proverbs, visions, prophecy, and parables. There is a marked difference between the literary styles of Genesis, Psalms, Proverbs, Malachi, Mark, Acts, Ephesians, and Revelation. That's one reason why some sections of Scripture are harder to preach than others.

This chapter begins to explain why some common understandings of Scripture are not necessarily the best way to read them. An example is the way Luke 15 is often understood—focusing on the return of the younger, prodigal brother. The genre clues for narrative—not parables—tell us that the subject of Luke 15 centers on the action of the religious leaders who are angry with Jesus' association with sinners. That forces the interpretation and application in the direction of the older brother who is angry at his father's attitude toward his younger sinner-son. At the end of the story and the sermon, the older brother is the one that needs to come home. Anyway, you get the idea.

*In chapter 5* our search for Christ-centered big ideas continues as we move from the textual big idea (texbi) to the contextual big idea (conbi). The contextual big idea is formed by allowing the immediate context of the preaching portion to flesh out the meaning of the textual idea. In this chapter, I present prominent themes and characteristics of Old Testament literature, the Gospels, and New Testament epistles that often embellish the meaning of preaching portions found within their literary realms.

The bizarre story of God's attempt to take Moses' life in Exodus 4:24–26 has meaning in light of God's goal to make Moses the deliverer of God's people. Moses isn't quite ready for this assignment because he is breaking the covenant agreement concerning circumcision. This brief narrative is part of God's faithfulness in remembering "his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with

Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew” (Ex. 2:24–25). But God also had to make sure His deliverer was righteous.

*At chapter 6* our search ends as we discover the canonical big idea (canbi). Here we are exploring how the canonical center of Scripture—the gospel and its implications—completes the meaning of the preaching portion and makes it true for the Church. Some readers will recognize this as a nuanced form of redemptive-historical or Christ-centered preaching.<sup>12</sup>

In this chapter I display my allegiance to the hermeneutic/homiletic of Dr. Timothy Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. I am especially interested in showing what’s potentially missing in a sermon when I don’t reach this level of meaning.

*Chapter 7* concludes our discussion of finding Christ-centered big ideas for biblical preaching by showing two benefits of our discovery. Here I demonstrate how the purpose of the sermon—what the message is designed to accomplish in the lives of the hearers—flows directly out of the Christ-centered big idea. And out of that purpose come the seeds of application. A key aspect of this section explores the validity and usefulness of faith-first or cross-eyed application, urging both Christians and non-Christians to affirm their trust in what God has done in Christ by the power of His Spirit.

---

12 Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*; Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1999); *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988); *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2007); Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1961); *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1988). *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2003); Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures*, 1st ed. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2007); Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006).

However, saying all that leads me to acknowledge what Fowl calls the “provisionality” of my method.<sup>13</sup> There is much more work to be done. I believe preaching portions have meaning, but I’m not sure I can always hit the bull’s eye of the big idea. It is important to practice hermeneutical humility while suggesting a method for accurate preaching.<sup>14</sup> I also acknowledge that there are other valid ways of studying the Bible for sermons. What follows is not *the* way, just *a* way. Please keep this in mind whenever you’re reading my interaction with the thoughts and methods of other authors. I’ve benefited greatly from their works. So, when I critically interact with them, I do not want to be critical of them.

Wilson puts it this way: “we necessarily recognize the limitation of any approach we take, and thereby also we remain open to other ways of reading Scripture...”<sup>15</sup> God knows we don’t get it “right” every time, every Sunday. If we are accurate, we’re only accurate to a point. Partial interpretation is something we live with each week if we’re honest about the task of interpreting and applying Scripture for the Church. Thankfully, God’s Spirit comes to our aid every Sunday in the teaching and learning together, all for the sake of His reputation in the Church and in the world.<sup>16</sup> I echo a former professor’s sentiment that “nothing would make me happier than to be completely outdone by others in this task, if it would lead to greater understanding of who... God... is and what

---

13 Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation*, 1. publ. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 89.

14 For an interesting discussion that attempts to achieve a balance between hermeneutical despair (anything interpretation will do) and hermeneutical arrogance (my meaning is the only right one) see Merold Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation?*, ed. James K. A. Smith, *The Church and Postmodern Culture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009).

15 Paul Scott Wilson, *God Sense: Reading the Bible for Preaching* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2001), 161.

16 Although the following approach does not discuss the role of the Holy Spirit, I believe He has a huge role to play in preaching. I do not want to give the impression that there is a method that eliminates our need for the Teacher to teach. I am assuming that those who implement the method will welcome the Holy Spirit’s active presence in the study and during the worship service.

it means to be bound to him through the death and resurrection of his Son.”<sup>17</sup> This is my sentiment too.

## Suggestions for Pastors Using This Book

Before moving on, I want to take a moment to speak to pastors who preach and usually create sermons within a week’s timeframe. I have prepared this book with you in mind. Like you, I study the Bible for a new sermon each week and, often, more than one. Sundays come quickly. If you adopt this method outlined in chapters 3–6, or parts of it, this book will help you at the front end of your study. With some practice and proficiency, you should be able to implement the method within the first few hours of sermon prep time.

Chapters 3–6 are outlined according to genre. When you begin to study your preaching portion for Sunday, I suggest you read the information in chapters 3–4 that pertains to its genre. So, if you’re planning to preach a narrative in Genesis, read the information in chapters 3–4 for narrative literature. The method varies slightly as you move from genre to genre.

As you follow the instructions on studying your particular genre, you will discover the logic or flow of your preaching portion very early in your workweek. This will enable you to identify the dominant and subordinate ideas contained within your preaching portion. Within an hour or so you should have a foundation upon which to build exegetical and theological insights. As you continue your sermon preparation, you can read the sections in chapters 5–7 that pertain to your genre. This part of the method will help you move closer to sermon application. My goal is to arrive at meaning and application fairly early in the week, knowing that I will check my work as the study progresses.

---

17 Peter Enns, *Exodus*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 32.



# 1

## DOES EXPOSITION STILL WORK?

*By our uncritical pursuit of relevance we have actually courted irrelevance; by our breathless chase after relevance without a matching commitment to faithfulness, we have become not only unfaithful but irrelevant; by our determined efforts to redefine ourselves in ways that are more compelling to the modern world than are faithful to Christ, we have lost not only our identity but our authority and our relevance. Our crying need is to be faithful as well as relevant [italics original].<sup>1</sup>*

**W**e begin our journey together with an earful from Os Guinness. The reason is because in every teaching venue—classroom, seminar, or workshop—I encounter fellow preachers who realize that topical preaching is standard fare these days. And topi-

---

<sup>1</sup> Os Guinness, *Prophetic Untimeliness: A Challenge to the Idol of Relevance* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2003), 15.

cal preaching is prevalent because many believe it's the most effective way to reach our listeners, especially seekers. Plenty of preachers fight this nagging thought: "Maybe Bible exposition doesn't work anymore in today's ministry context. Maybe I should get onboard the topical teaching train."

You might not go that far. However, the success of influential, seeker-sensitive congregations may make you wonder if exposition is the *best* way to reach today's congregants. Many of those churches adopted a style of preaching in order to be more effective. The choice reflects their perception of what congregants need and want to hear.<sup>2</sup>

Pastor Rick Warren radically changed his preaching style when he began his ministry in California.<sup>3</sup> In preparing to plant Saddleback Community Church, Warren reviewed the messages he preached in the previous ten years as a Southern Baptist evangelist. Using the criteria, "Would this make sense to a totally un-churched person?" he threw out all but two sermons.<sup>4</sup> Warren writes, "If I was going to start a church by attracting hardcore pagans, it would have to be a message to which they could relate."<sup>5</sup>

Warren selected topical preaching as the style that relates best to non-Christians. His dominant approach is to locate common ground he has with the audience and then bring instruction from God's Word that addresses those subjects. If you're aware of Warren's ministry, you know that this kind of preaching works.<sup>6</sup>

---

2 For an analysis of when the listener began to drive the direction of preaching see Shawn D. Radford, "The New Homiletic within Non-Christendom," *JEHS* 5(2005). Rob Bell puts it this way: "So my understanding in communication is you engage people right where they are; if you don't they leave." Cf. "The Subversive Art," <http://ctlibrary.com>. 6. For a frightening look at how perceived irrelevance can derail a pastor, see Marvin Olasky, "It All Fit Together': Interview with Bill Moyer," *World* 23, no. 5 (2009).

3 Cf. his chapter on preaching to the un-churched in Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub., 1995), 293–306.

4 *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub., 1995), 293.

5 *The Purpose Driven Church*, 294.

6 I am aware of all kinds of voices disagreeing with Warren's methods.

So, before we get too far, there is little value in discussing how to preach with greater accuracy if pastors are losing their confidence in expository preaching. We begin, then, with the goal of bolstering our belief in accurate, theological exposition's ability to shepherd those who choose to listen to us preach.<sup>7</sup> To accomplish this goal I want to study a Scripture that has not received much press in homiletical discussions.

### **The Effective Un-Seeker-Sensitive Approach of 1 Corinthians 14:24–25**

First Corinthians 14:24–25 boosted my confidence in the effectiveness of God's Word like no other Scripture. I know it's an isolated, hypothetical situation, but the Apostle Paul is wrapping up a

---

Some would say the method doesn't work, despite the results. Some say it is impossible to do what Warren is attempting to do. For instance, Lloyd-Jones asserts: "...there is no neutral point at which the Christian and the non-Christian can meet, there is no common starting point as it were." Cf. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers*, 40th Anniversary Edition ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011), 60. However, I am not on a crusade against a particular style of preaching. It is not my intention to critique the rationale for creating seeker-sensitive worship services and sermons. Personally, I wrestle with the concept of creating worship services for people who cannot yet worship. All I want to do is point out that topical preaching aimed at the felt needs of non-Christians is not the only effective way to preach in church. If you're aware of Tim Keller's style of preaching, then you know seekers can be reached his way too. A side note: I did find it interesting that when Willow Creek published the disappointing results of the self-study of their congregational health, there was no analysis of how the sermon style might have contributed to this. Cf. Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Barrington, Ill.: Willow Creek Resources, 2007). Please hear me. I am only arguing that the popular method of topical preaching to felt needs is not the *only* way to be effective. I also want to be clear on this matter: no preaching style has the ability to stop carnality in its tracks. Even Jesus' teaching could not stop a Judas from jumping ship!

7 I do recognize the category of topical exposition. My purpose for this section is to help some readers reconsider the value of preaching through books of the Bible or through sections of books of the Bible. I view topical preaching as a contrast to preaching through a book.

lengthy discussion of how spiritual gifts can serve God's goals in the Church. Surely he wouldn't have mentioned this surprising and sought-after result if it couldn't happen regularly. God instructs His Church in verse 1 "...earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy." In verses 24–25 God shows us how effective this gift can be so that all of us would desire such a gift. The verses highlight the ability of God's Word to reach insiders and outsiders with an insider-directed message.

The immediate context is a contrast between two hypothetical situations in a local church: the reaction of "outsiders or unbelievers" who enter a church service where everyone is speaking in tongues (v. 23) versus their reaction if they enter a church service where everyone is prophesying (vv. 24–25). Some suggest this visitor is "an unbeliever who has already begun to show interest in the gospel—an inquirer."<sup>8</sup>

So, what happens when a non-Christian visitor enters and hears the word of God? Verse 24 explains: "...he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you." The implication is the non-Christian does not receive a favorable verdict; he fails the examination administered by the Word of God. Bruce explains it this way: "This, he will say, is God's message for me..."<sup>9</sup> That's relevance; that's effectiveness.<sup>10</sup>

We know from 1 Corinthians 14:3–5 that the purpose of prophecy was to build up the church. Paul's hypothetical situation

8 Frank Gaebelein, ed. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1976), 274. Others understand this person as "a complete newcomer." Cf. Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 243.

9 F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, New Century Bible (London: Oliphants, 1971), 133.

10 Conzelmann believes this hypothetical reaction provides a key for understanding the meaning of prophecy: "it is not prediction of the future, but unmasking of man." Cf. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 243.

outlines what can happen to an outsider who overhears an insider-directed message. Verse 25 shows the unbeliever taking the posture of a worshiper. Bruce believes this is the production of a believer: “prophecy is a sign for Believers in the sense that it produces Believers.”<sup>11</sup> The seeker becomes a saint during the teaching time. The prophetic Word touched a nerve.<sup>12</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:24–25 describes what we all want to take place in church.

### A Caveat Concerning Selecting Preaching Portions

First Corinthians 14:24–25 reveals that choosing sermon topics based on felt needs of listeners is not the only way to be effective. Pastors can select preaching portions with confidence that the Word of God works.<sup>13</sup> Those of us lectionary-challenged preachers often select preaching portions that meet current, congregational needs. I recently completed a sermon series on Isaiah and am now preaching through Luke’s Gospel.<sup>14</sup> I have my reasons and our El-

---

11 Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 133.

12 It may be helpful to evaluate exposition on the basis of the phrase in 1 Cor. 14:25, “the secrets of his heart are disclosed....” As I’m developing a sermon during the week, I should ask myself whether my exposition has reached the level of disclosing the secrets of our hearts. More research needs to be done in this promising area of homiletics.

13 I am indebted to my colleague, Dr. Jeffrey Arthurs, and my friend, Dr. John Wise, for urging me to think through the rationale pastors use for choosing certain preaching portions. In his erudite dissertation, Kuruvilla explains the importance of all Scripture: “the Rule of Substantiality affirms that no part of the canon is devoid of importance or consequence; for instance, in 1 Cor. 9:9, Paul considers Deut. 25:4, a relatively unimportant [to modern/postmodern readers] Text in the OT, as being significant for the ‘current’ practice of the community of believers.” Cf. Abraham Kuruvilla, “Text to Praxis: Hermeneutics and Homiletics in Dialogue” (University of Aberdeen, 2007), 152.

14 I guess I could be accused of committing expository snobbery. I used to think and, still do to some degree, that choosing a Scripture Text is more noble and less dangerous than choosing a topic. Recently, Barth set me straight: “Even in picking a Text the same thing may happen as in picking a theme. I may reach into the Bible, find something ‘nice,’ and lift it out. It is

ders concur with the decision. Usually, to break up the pace, I've chosen to preach shorter series—topical exposition—in the middle of long book studies (e.g. in between Isaiah 1–39 and 40–66) and before beginning another book study.

Criteria for selection include providing a balanced diet of Old and New Testament, narrative and epistle. There are times when the emotional and spiritual state of a congregation favors one preaching portion over another. I've often chosen Books of the Bible on the intensely spiritual reason that the congregation hasn't studied that Book yet. And there are times when I am not ready to tackle a particular Book. Pastors also choose preaching portions because of specific occasions such as holy days, weddings, and funerals.

When it comes to choosing preaching portions, audience analysis does come into play. However, I do not want to think that choosing the right topic will win the day. For instance, I know that any given subject matter in Scripture will be embraced by some more than others. In anticipation of this, you may have said something like this: "You may not need this sermon right now, but, believe me, if you live long enough, you will need it later." Both topical preaching and preaching through a Book can fall on deaf ears. Some of God's finest preachers have experienced this. The following examples, however, are usually used to urge preachers to adopt a more effective preaching style.

It's easy, at first read, to champion Paul's sermon recorded in Acts 17:22–31 as an example of how audience analysis can aid sermon effectiveness. Paul preaches in the synagogue to philosophers in Athens about Jesus and the resurrection (cf. vv. 17–18). Jesus and the resurrection were interesting to these learned listeners be-

---

dangerous even to address a specific congregational situation or experience in terms of a specific Text. In such situations we must bring the Bible as a whole to bear. Then God might perhaps legitimately speak to the situation and work a miracle. But we may not count on this. The pastor might easily become the pope of his congregation, presenting his own idea instead of God's Word." Cf. Barth, *Homiletics*, 49–50.

cause, as we're told in v. 21, everyone in town spent lots of time exploring new ideologies.

Paul begins his sermon with an attention-getting observation (cf. vv. 22–23). Then, he moves to a brief discussion of theology proper (cf. vv. 24–29). He closes with a call for repentance (cf. vv. 30–31). However, verse 32 records the less-than-stellar results of his apologetic preaching: “some mocked. But others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’” So much for the effectiveness of preaching relevant topics.<sup>15</sup>

Then, there's Jesus. His teaching and preaching are held up as a good model, and rightly so. Schuller explained his approach to preaching: “I want to attract [the non-Christian listener], and so I use the strategy that Jesus used. I preach the way Jesus preached.”<sup>16</sup> What doesn't seem to get much press is the fact that Jesus was not very seeker-sensitive. At the risk of sounding like an irreverent Reverend, He wasn't always very effective.

For instance, Matthew 4:17 records one of Jesus' early sermons: “From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” Not very seeker-sensitive. I am confident Jesus did not choose that topic because He thought most of His listeners felt the need for it. Jesus shows us that choosing a relevant topic is not a guarantee for converting sinners. In Matthew 19:22 the rich, young ruler selected the topic. Yet he walked away from Jesus after hearing Jesus' teaching.<sup>17</sup>

---

15 For over twenty years God has graciously allowed me to provide two congregations with a steady diet of through-the-Book preaching. Over these years I have experienced one main difficulty of this approach (not to mention the sheer terror of having to tackle certain Texts!): *Great sermons require great texts, and not all pastors and parishioners consider every text a great text.* More than a few times I wished the preaching portion for the following Sunday would disappear. It didn't and I preached it because of a firm belief in the authority and effectiveness of Scripture.

16 Michael Horton, “Free Space: Interviews from Our Archives,” *Modern Reformation* 11, no. 1 (2002): 33.

17 Warren writes, “Anyone can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart.” Cf. Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 220. I'm not sure

Apparently Jesus operated on the assumption that His listeners either had the ability to receive His teaching or they didn't. He would often end His teaching with: "He who has ears, let him hear" (cf. Matt. 13:1–9). It seems no amount of audience analysis, teaching style, or relevant topics create an ability to receive truth. The real need is for supernatural hearing.

Paul frames the discussion with different language in 1 Corinthians 1:18–25 when he says, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." The description, "us who are being saved," identifies listeners for whom the gospel message is already relevant. Contrast "us" with those who are not interested in that message.<sup>18</sup>

If I'm not careful, I may begin to think that sermon effectiveness is the result of human effort alone. I may think that if I can simply make the right choice of topic in the study and choose the right words during the sermon, God will work. Does the Holy Spirit open the ears of contemporary listeners—both Christian and non-Christian—only when certain topics are discussed? Is the Holy Spirit handcuffed when a pastor decides to preach through a book of the Bible? Is it easier for Him to create ears that can hear with topical preaching?

Apart from the need for creating a comprehensible message, relevance and effectiveness is determined more by the Holy Spirit's activity than by human effort and evaluation (cf. Rom. 10:14; 1 Cor. 14:23–24). Lloyd-Jones warns, "...there is a very real danger of our putting our faith in our sermon rather than in the Spirit. Our faith should not be in the sermon, it should be in the Holy Spirit Himself."<sup>19</sup>

---

how to square this statement with those times when Jesus preached without success, success being defined as converting the listener.

18 Thompson writes, "[Paul's] task is to confront the audience with a message that it does not want to hear, leaving the response to God." Cf. James Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 49.

19 Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers*, 242.

I began the chapter by stating that there is no need for us to explore preaching with greater accuracy if we're not convinced that exposition still works. Through a brief study of 1 Cor. 14:24–25 I have attempted to affirm or restore confidence in the ability of Scripture to reach insiders and outsiders with an insider-directed message. Now let's move to the method.

