

“Robby Gallaty and Steven Smith are both teachers and practitioners of faithful biblical exposition. What a delight it is to have their thinking on this important subject put to writing for the benefit and blessing of others. I am happy to commend this work to anyone who desires to rightly divide the Word of truth.”

—**Daniel L. Akin**, president, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Gallaty and Smith are two popular preachers who have produced an excellent book on text-driven preaching that defines it, theologically grounds it, and gives a methodology under the two key headings of interpretation and communication—all in less than 200 pages. The content here is simply superb. Here is how to do it from two men who do it well! Highly recommended!”

—**David L. Allen**, distinguished professor of preaching, George W. Truett Chair of Pastoral Ministry, and director, Southwestern Center for Expository Preaching, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“There are a lot of great books on preaching, but this one is the most straightforward and accessible I’ve come across. In this book, Gallaty and Smith provide a clear primer for text-driven preaching, reminding us why this kind of preaching is important and how to go about crafting a faithful sermon. This is such a helpful tool to anyone desiring to preach!”

—**Matt Carter**, pastor of preaching and vision,
The Austin Stone Community Church, Austin, TX

“I know these men and respect them. Without mentioning me, they have described much of my own life and work. Would you preach well? Read this book and profit.”

—**Mark Dever**, senior pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church,
Washington, DC, and president, 9Marks

“Robby Gallaty and Steven Smith’s book breaks down the process for preaching text-driven sermons in a way that ordinary church members can get their minds around. In this book, you have a chance to learn from the best. Every teacher, bi-vocational pastor, and seminary student should check out this book.”

—**J. D. Greear**, pastor, The Summit Church, Raleigh-Durham, NC

“Here’s a very helpful book for those that desire to faithfully preach the Word. Gallaty and Smith write as pastor-scholars who love Christ’s church. Both men can articulate the philosophical and methodological components of expository preaching clearly, and they can also deliver engaging expositions practically. All of us who handle the word of truth can improve, and this book will surely help us make progress in the pulpit.”

—**Tony Merida**, pastor for preaching and vision, Imago Dei Church,
Raleigh, NC, and associate professor of preaching,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Preaching has fallen on hard times. An open debate is now being waged over the character and centrality of preaching in the church. At stake is nothing less than the integrity of Christian worship and proclamation. In this book, Robby Gallaty and Steven Smith provide a biblically grounded manual for faithful proclamation of God’s Word. Their commitment to the authority of Scripture and the centrality of preaching in the life of the church is a faithful witness in the age of entertainment-driven ministry. *Preaching for the Rest of Us* is a practical and theologically rich resource to help you grow in more faithful proclamation of God’s Word.”

—**R. Albert Mohler Jr.**, president,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Robby Gallaty and Steven Smith have achieved something in *Preaching for the Rest of Us* that is genuinely unique. Recognizing the complication of much homiletical theory, these two great preachers have cobbled together a total introduction to preaching that is helpful to me! A grasp of the ultimate goal in preaching enables these prophets to walk all of us, beginner and established practitioner, down the highway of great biblical preaching. This is a significant contribution.”

—**Paige Patterson**, president,
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“It wasn’t until well into my pastoral ministry that I realized that we aren’t going to fulfill the Great Commission solely with preachers like me—seminary-trained, vocational, and Westernized. It’s going to take preachers who earn a living by their ministries and preachers who go to secular jobs every day. It’s going to take preachers who’ve been to seminary and preachers who haven’t. It’s going to take preachers in America and preachers abroad. Gallaty and Smith get that. In *Preaching for the Rest of Us*, these two effective and experienced pastors ‘put the cookies on the bottom shelf,’ where all of us can grab and eat. They cull down the principles and processes of biblical exposition to the basic essentials. If you’re looking for a trustworthy ‘quick-start guide’ (xvii) to preaching that’s driven by both the theology and the text of Scripture, look no further.”

—**Jim Shaddix**, W. A. Criswell Professor of Expository Preaching,
and director, Center for Pastoral Leadership and Preaching,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

PREACHING

FOR THE REST OF US

PREACHING
FOR THE REST OF US

ESSENTIALS
FOR
TEXT-DRIVEN
PREACHING

ROBBY GALLATY AND STEVEN SMITH



ACADEMIC

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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From Steven:

This book is lovingly dedicated to my parents,
Sandy and Bailey Smith.

Psalm 16:6

From Robby:

To Jim Shaddix:

From the first day I heard a text-driven sermon,
at Edgewater Baptist Church, until now,
my life and preaching have never been the same.
Thank you for modeling what you teach.

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Preface

Leading a Text-Driven Life

Now Ezra had determined in his heart to study the law of the LORD, obey it, and teach its statutes and ordinances in Israel.

—Ezra 7:10

Text-driven preaching flows from a text-driven life.

The text-driven sermon is not the big goal of life. Text-driven preaching is what happens when a preacher is so full of the text of Scripture that, when preached, the sermon represents the substance, structure, and spirit of the text. Art and calling imitate life. We defer to the text in the sermon because we defer to the text in all things. The sermon is simply a public working out of private conviction. The macro goal: to *live* a text-driven life. This commitment to knowing and doing the Word will, as Ezra modeled, lead to faithful teaching of the Word. The order is inviolable.

So, with all that needs to be said about preaching, and there is a lot, there are at least these overarching goals: to learn to love God through His Word and to lead others to do the same. The sermon, in its commitment to the Word, is a metaphor for life because the sermon is a reflection of how the life has been lived.

Loving God through His Word

Our love for preaching should be motivated by a love for God's Word—not in an academic sense, but rather, based on the reality that God has chosen to relate to us through His Word. This has always been true. From the Garden, God related to Adam and Eve through His spoken word (Genesis 1–3). God spoke to His people through His leaders Noah, Abraham, and Moses (Genesis–Deuteronomy). He codified His word in stone (Exodus 20) and then spoke to Israel through the prophets (Isaiah–Malachi). His Son, the Word, came to re-present His words to us as the final word (John 1:1–5; Heb 2:1–4). Then His Son ascended, leaving behind the Spirit, who would give witness to the Word (John 14:15–31). This Spirit is still actively making the complete Word come to life.

God's principal means of relating to us is His Word, illumined by His Spirit. God leads us through various means of grace, such as relationships, music, or circumstances. However, *His leading of us is always consistent with His revelation to us in Scripture*. Our fear is that the people we lead are far too busy looking for a word from God in places other than where His voice is clearly revealed: in His Word. We want the immediate, so we ignore the ultimate. We are called to lead God's people from this malaise to looking intently at His Word. *We want you to get into the Word until the Word gets into you.*

Leading People to His Word

This is the preacher's practice. We love God through His Word, and then we lead people to His Word. That's it. It's called "leading from the study." By this we mean the preacher commits to stay in the chair until the Word is clear, and as a result, the Word changes him. Then, watching the preacher change, the people also change as the Word activates their hearts. Eventually the listeners become leaders, who influence change in the church as well. At that point the pastor is leading the church from the study, from his willingness to stay in the seat until he knows what the text means. If the message doesn't move the preacher in the study, it probably won't move the people in the service.

God save us from loving preaching more than we love Scripture. God save us from loving expository preaching more than we love Scripture. The method is simply a means to the end of faithfulness to re-present what God has already spoken. Text-driven preaching is not the end. It is the means to the end of faithfulness. If at some point we find a method of preaching that more faithfully represents God's message than what we have presented in this book, we will quickly and gladly change our approach. In reality, change is the goal, a honing in the same direction. As our love for God's Word grows, we will find new ways to be more faithful to it. No methods are sacred. The method of text-driven preaching is valuable because it exalts what is sacred, God's Word, and it affirms in practice that we can do nothing but re-present it faithfully. We are not to give our lives to a method, but to figuring out the best way to present God's Word. Everything we do begins with a love for God's Word.

About Our Journey

Actually, both of us learned how to preach *after* seminary. This is an odd confession because we both had great formal educations; we learned from some of the best preaching professors and preachers. Yet after a few months of being pastors, we were struck by our own limitations. That's when our education began. My (Steve's) experience is that this is common. When you are learning something in the classroom, you just can't conceive of how it will play out in practice. It's in the practice that lectures finally make sense.

This is written for those who have not preached, for those who have no formal education, and for those who, like us, knew how to preach and later realized that it is more daunting than we originally imagined. If you got it all the first time in seminary, you may not need this book. This is preaching for the rest of us.

Whether you are just starting or restarting, we are grateful you have picked up this book. We have been on this journey and now are excited to serve you. So perhaps some introductions are in order.

We are from very different backgrounds and experiences. I grew up in a pastor's home, am a fourth-generation preacher, and was called to preach at an early age. I was a pastor for eight years, have taught preaching for the last 12 years, and have now transitioned back into the pastorate. Robby experienced a radical conversion to Christ after battling a three-year drug and alcohol addiction. He has been a pastor for the last 12 years.

We both have written books. Robby writes the kinds of books people want and need to read. I write the kinds of books that students have to read. And while I try, Robby will always have bigger biceps.

We share the same theological convictions and many of the same practices. However, we are different in the way we approach things and have tried to include this where appropriate. People who embrace the same high view of Scripture and therefore take preaching seriously still must tailor their approaches based on their personalities and contexts.

For me, this book puts to paper what I have been teaching for a while. Thus, much of what is here has already been said in a classroom, lecture, or blog. We've tried to give proper citation where possible, but I am fully aware that some, maybe many, thoughts have seeped in from other sources. The follow-up to this book, *Recapturing the Voice of God*, which explains how to preach the specific genres of Scripture, was written first, so we are grateful to Jim Baird and the team at B&H Academic for allowing some of that content to be reprinted here.

For Robby, this book conceptualizes the practices he has implemented for years as a pastor. By no means are we experts in text-driven preaching; however, we both share a passion to grow as preachers by remaining lifelong learners. We pray you share the same passion we do: correctly handling God's Word.

Why This Book?

The amount of literature on preaching makes another book seem presumptuous. However, we felt there was a place for a book that (1) taught

text-driven preaching for those with no theological training, (2) was based on a theological foundation, and (3) was short.

There are thousands of volumes on preaching. This is a quick-start guide.

Our commitment is that we err on the side of being stripped down. This means we will leave out, or underemphasize, some important aspects of preaching. We encourage you to turn to the many resources that are available, and especially the Recommended Reading at the end of each chapter.

How to Use This Book

We want you to prepare a sermon as you are reading this book. Here's how:

Take your Bible, find a passage you want to preach, turn to chapter 3 in this book, and start working on it. Read each chapter and follow the steps. If you are not already, pretend you are a pastor working on a text to preach.

It might take time, so plan on two weeks to work on the sermon. At the end of two weeks, you will have a text-driven sermon. Can you learn to preach in two weeks? Of course not. But starting with the foundations might force you to ask why we would recommend something a certain way.

The disciplines here represent mountain peaks. In the same way that every mountain peak is supported by a mountain, there are theological and philosophical foundations that are not covered here. For that reason we have included two brief introductory chapters: an introduction to preaching and a theological foundation to preaching. Prayerfully looking at the peaks will make you want to climb the mountain, that is, to keep reading on preaching and expose yourself to the literature. Preaching is difficult. We need the motivation that comes from the conviction that God has revealed Himself in His Word.

So, let's begin on the wings of a prayer:

Lord, as we walk this road together, please help us fall in love with Your Word more deeply, and, as a result of loving You through Your Word, may we gladly submit to it. Then, as we work together, may

You give us the grace to then work out in a sermon the text You have worked into us. May we, like Ezra, who set his heart to study, do, and teach Your Word, do the same. In Jesus's name and for His glory. Amen.

Introduction

Throughout all of history—from creation to eternity, from Genesis to Revelation—God establishes His purposes through His word. Scripture echoes this truth, for at every turn the word of God does the work of God. In Genesis 1, the text repeatedly draws attention to God’s speech: “God *said*, ‘Let there be light’”; “God *said*, ‘Let there be an expanse between the waters’”; and “God *said*, ‘Let the water under the sky be gathered into one place’” (vv. 3, 6, 9). As we move through the Old Testament, we observe the word of God empowering men and women to do extraordinary things. We see the word of God come to Abraham in Genesis 12, and his obedience to it in the face of doubt and uncertainty is “credited to [him] for righteousness” (Rom 4:9).

We see the word of God come to Moses in a forgotten corner of the desert from a burning bush, telling him to approach the most powerful man in the world with a request to release God’s people from captivity. Through Moses’s obedience to this word, God’s people are freed from centuries of slavery.

We see the word of God deliver commandments for this newly freed people to both sustain them as a nation and set them apart for their Creator’s use. These commandments were so powerful that God commanded Moses’s successor, “Above all, be strong and very courageous to carefully observe the whole instruction My servant Moses commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right or the left, so that you will have success wherever you go.”¹

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Preacher’s Portrait* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 55.

We see the word of God come to ordinary men and turn them into prophets who proclaim the truth of God, no matter how difficult it is to hear or how much trouble it brings them. The word drives the speech of Isaiah: “Listen, heavens, and pay attention, earth, for the LORD has spoken” (Isa 1:2). It would not fail: “my word that comes from my mouth will not return to me empty, but it will accomplish what I please and will prosper in what I send it to do” (55:11). The same word comes to Ezekiel, whose book employs the phrase “The word of the LORD came to me” nearly 50 times. We also hear this phrase from Hosea, Joel, Amos, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Zechariah. We see it come to kings and peasants, to rulers and prophets and children. It guides a nation, restores severed bonds, penetrates the hearts of men, and rains down fire from the sky.

And then the word is silent for 400 years. But it is not dead, nor does it sleep.

Again we see the Word come from the mouth of John the Baptist as a “voice . . . crying out in the wilderness” (Matt 3:3; Mark 1:3). We are reminded that this word, which has saturated every facet of Scripture and history, has been constant since the beginning: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning” (John 1:1–2). We learn that the Word created all things, both known and unknown, seen and invisible: “All things were created through him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created” (v. 3).

And then, most miraculously of all, we see for the first time the Word wrapped in flesh, cresting a hill to be baptized; and He is greeted with reverence and relief: “Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (v. 29).

Paul instructed the Romans, “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the message about Christ” (Rom 10:17)—from hearing Scripture. In his final letter to Timothy, Paul emphasized the importance of studying the Word: “Be diligent to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who doesn’t need to be ashamed, correctly teaching

the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). Likewise, the apostle Peter stated, “You have been born again—not of perishable seed but of imperishable—through the living and enduring word of God. For all flesh is like grass, and all its glory like a flower of the grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever” (1 Pet 1:23–25). Jesus’s half brother James, an unbeliever during Jesus’s earthly ministry, penned these words years after his death: “By his own choice, *he gave us birth* by the word of truth so that we would be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures” (James 1:18).

The author of Hebrews cited the importance of the Word as well. At the outset of the book, the Word-made-flesh, Jesus Christ, is extolled as the Author of all things: “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact expression of his nature, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3). God’s Word is described by its convicting nature: “For the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating as far as the separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (4:12).

It is no wonder that the Mishnah, a collection of the Jewish traditions, encourages followers of God to “pore over it [the Scripture] again and again, for everything is contained in it; look into it, grow old and gray over it, and do not depart from it, for there is no better pursuit for you than this.”² Every instance of effective preaching throughout Scripture is nothing but a proclamation of God’s Word.³ Even today, the Word is not an archaic device used in an ancient text; it is alive and breathing and working actively, and it is a preacher’s job to deliver it appropriately. The purpose of this book is to help equip preachers, and anyone else who shares the Word of the Lord, to do it correctly, appropriately, and with the respect it deserves.

² Mishnah, Pirke Avot 5:27; Ann Spangler and Lois Tverberg, *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus: How the Jewishness of Jesus Can Transform Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), loc. 4183, Kindle.

³ Robby Gallaty, *Firmly Planted* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 6–8.

The Word Does the Work

Charles Spurgeon, the so-called prince of preachers, declared, “Nobody ever outgrows Scripture: the book widens and deepens with our years.”⁴ When a man steps behind the sacred desk, he stands on the shoulders of generations of faithful men who have come before him. The task of preaching supersedes all other ministry assignments, for the calling is not to speak merely about God, but to be a mouthpiece for God, saying, “Thus says the Lord.” The task requires a supernatural anointing from on high. Jesus’s first recorded message in His hometown synagogue began with His reading of the words, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news” (Luke 4:18).

The journey toward dividing the Word of God with accuracy begins with understanding the Bible’s authority. The pulpit’s power does not come through cute stories, funny illustrations, or carefully crafted outlines. It comes from the exposition of God’s Word. Paul challenged his son in the faith, Timothy, like this: “I solemnly charge you before God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and because of his appearing and his kingdom: *Preach the word*” (2 Tim 4:1–2). R. Kent Hughes explains:

[Jesus’s] *logos*, his word, was perfect. Whatever he said was absolutely true. His exegesis of Scripture was flawless. His application of spiritual truth was the most penetrating in all of history, as we see in such discourses as the Sermon on the Mount.

His *ethos*, the kind of person he was, was without parallel in the human race. The tone of his voice, the expression on his face, the integrity of his eyes flowed with truth. His *pathos* came from a heart absolutely convinced of man’s need, absolutely loving, and absolutely determined. There never has been anyone as truly passionate as Christ in all human experience.

⁴ Charles Spurgeon, *The Complete Works of Charles Spurgeon*, vol. 17, *Sermons 968 to 1027* (1871; n.p.: DelMarva, 2013), Kindle.

These three, his *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*, blended in Christ with such force that he, from the beginning, was the greatest communicator the world has ever known!⁵

Jesus, as the walking Word of God, should be our example for preaching the Word of God. To do this correctly, certain presuppositions should be fundamental for preachers:

- Scripture is *inspired*, or the breath of God (2 Tim 3:16–17)
- Scripture is *inerrant*, or without errors (John 17:17).
- Scripture is *infallible*, or will not lead us astray (1 Pet 1:23–25).
- Scripture is *sufficient*, or all we need for salvation (Rom 10:13–15, 17).

Another crucial point is that preaching itself is an act of extending grace to listeners.

Grace to You

Have you ever noticed that Paul introduced his letters with the words, “Grace to you,” and ended many of them the same way? Examples of this can be found in Galatians and Ephesians. Galatians begins with “Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3), and ends with “Brothers and sisters, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen” (6:18). Ephesians begins with “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:2), and closes with “Grace be with all who have undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ” (6:24). The same turn of phrase can be seen to some degree in almost all of Paul’s writings.

Indeed, grace accompanies the Word of God. Paul literally bookended his words with it. God freely gives grace to us, and preachers can extend grace to their hearers through the proclamation of God’s Word.

⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant and Savior*, 2 vols. in 1, ESV ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), chap. 4.

Begin with the End in Mind

At the very core, every disciple of Jesus is to be a student for life. In the same vein, becoming an effective communicator of God's Word is a lifelong journey. This book is going to delve into a number of areas that will sharpen your skills as a preacher, but many of them will not be easy to implement. Preaching the Word of God requires dedication and complete removal of yourself from the equation. The moment your sermon becomes about you is the moment you must take serious stock of where you stand as a preacher.

Miss Betty's comment after every sermon, "Pastor, that was the best sermon I've ever heard," may be comforting, but it is not very helpful in a preacher's journey of developing into a better communicator of God's Word. Opening up a sermon to critique can be tough at first, but it is an essential step for growth. Constructive criticism is necessary for development, and it can only come through humility. Trusted friends and staff members can be some of your greatest assets in becoming a better preacher.

Every preacher needs a feedback loop. This can take place over coffee, breakfast, or dinner. Do you have trustworthy, faithful men in your church who can meet once a week? Are there students you can meet with who sense a leading into ministry? Are there Sunday school teachers you can meet with once a week? Maybe you can gather with other pastors in the area to talk about ways to progress as a preacher.

Equally debilitating to the growth of a preacher is laziness. As this book will reveal, expository preaching is hard work, which may be why many default back to easier methods that often lead to doctrinal error.

Let this not be said of us. The same Spirit who can empower in the pulpit can anoint in the study. A systematic process of preparation curbs laziness. As it is often quipped (in one variation or another), "If you fail to plan, you can plan to fail."

Let's continue our journey together by establishing a theology of preaching.

1 | A Theology of Text-Driven Preaching

There is no shortage of good arguments for preaching in an expository, text-driven way. Perhaps the most significant argument stems from the nature of the Word itself. If we believe Scripture contains the very words of God and that both God and what He speaks are perfect, then anything we do that hinders our presenting Scripture is a tragedy. While the nature of the Word is the primary factor that compels expositional preaching, the nature of the preacher's call and the nature of the church also lend support to this methodology. These three arguments for text-driven preaching may be summarized as follows:

1. The Nature of the Word: *We are called to preach Christ, and Christ is revealed in the Word.*
2. The Nature of the Call: *Preaching the text is working out our own call to ministry by crucifying our personal agendas so others might live, and thus living according to Christ's example.*
3. The Nature of the Church: *The Word of God sanctifies the church.*

After we deal with these three axioms, we will deal with the nature of text-driven preaching.

The Nature of the Word: We Are Called to Preach Christ, and Christ Is Revealed in the Word

Nothing is clearer from the biblical witness than that the apostles were consumed with preaching Christ. He, and He alone, was their message. Notice in a few sample texts how simple the apostles' message was:

[Peter and John] were teaching the people and *proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead*. (Acts 4:1–2)

Every day in the temple, and in various homes, they continued teaching and proclaiming *the good news that Jesus is the Messiah*. (Acts 5:42)

Some of them . . . began speaking to the Greeks also, proclaiming *the good news about the Lord Jesus*. (Acts 11:20)

“This *Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah*.” (Acts 17:3)

“But *we preach Christ . . .*” (1 Cor 1:23)

“For we are not proclaiming ourselves but *Jesus Christ as Lord*.” (2 Cor 4:5)

“God . . . was pleased to reveal his Son in me, *so that I could preach him . . .*” (Gal 1:16)

Luke references the preaching of Christ interchangeably with the preaching of the Word (see Acts 8:4; 13:3). To the biblical authors, preaching Christ meant preaching the message of His death, burial, and resurrection, and all it implies. To say we “preach Jesus” implies both proclamation and explanation. We are proclaiming Christ and saying about Him what God has said about Him.

The first preachers were making a massive theological claim when they preached that Jesus was “the Messiah,” or, the Christ (Acts 5:42). The significance of this cannot be overstated. We must remember that for hundreds of

years, the Jews had been looking for their promised Messiah. They expected a warrior like David to liberate them from bondage, to restore Israel to the kingdom it once was. Yet Scripture spoke of a suffering Messiah (Isa 52:13–53:12). Paul made this clear in 1 Cor 15:1–4:

Now I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, the gospel I preached to you, which you received, on which you have taken your stand and by which you are being saved, if you hold to the message I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day *according to the Scriptures*.

Paul’s point here was that Christ’s actions had been prophesied in the Old Testament. Therefore, Paul argued, Jesus must be the Christ because His life fit the prophesied pattern. We also see in Acts 5:42 and 17:3 that the first Christians were Jews trying to make this connection as they preached. Jesus was, and is, the Christ.

The passage just referenced in 1 Corinthians, in addition to announcing Jesus as Messiah, also functions in another way: it interprets Old Testament texts. Since Paul believed the Old Testament revelation of Christ validated the New Testament appearance of Christ, he did what Jesus had done during His time on earth: he opened the Old Testament and explained its teaching about Christ.

We have an odd tendency to reverse this in our preaching. We stick to the New Testament and disregard the majority of our Bibles. Often, the reasoning for such a practice is that the Old Testament is strange and foreign, separated from us by years and continents and history. However, did you ever stop to think that when the apostles were “preaching Jesus” they were interpreting the Old Testament?

We can’t love Jesus without a practical love of God’s Word. Additionally, we won’t be able to fully appreciate the New Testament until we understand the Old Testament. The Bible is God’s chosen means to help us comprehend

Christ, and Christ is the One who helps us understand the Bible. These two ideas are crucial if we are to preach in a way that honors Him.

Scripture Reveals Christ

It is clear the New Testament is about Christ. The first four books reveal His actions, the book of Acts reveals the work of His church immediately after His ascension, the Epistles outline how He leads His church, and the New Testament concludes with Christ revealed.

However, the New Testament is not merely *about* Christ; Christ *inspired* it (2 Tim 3:16) and prepared His disciples to receive it. In John 16:12, Jesus said to His disciples, “I still have many things to tell you, but you can’t bear them now.” What were these things He would later say? They were the books of Romans through Revelation: the rest of the New Testament. The Scriptures that were not spoken directly from the mouth of Jesus during His earthly ministry are still His words. The New Testament is the early church working out Christ’s teaching.

In John 16, Jesus made another remarkable statement. He said that by the authority of Christ, the Holy Spirit would reveal truth to the church: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. For he will not speak on his own, but he will speak whatever he hears. He will also declare to you what is to come. He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you” (vv. 13–14).

Here we learn that Jesus is the mind behind the New Testament. And since He ascended to heaven before the New Testament was written, the Holy Spirit revealed these things and, in so doing, glorified Jesus. The Bible is Jesus teaching us about Jesus. Every time we open the pages of Scripture and read, the Holy Spirit speaks to us what Jesus would tell us if He were physically with us. Scripture is a living Word, which exhales the very presence of Christ. It gives glory to Christ. Christ is the Word, and there is no knowledge of Him without the inscripturated Word.

Remarkably, preaching is an act that involves the entire Trinity. As we explain the Word of God, the Holy Spirit draws attention to Jesus, who always gives glory to the Father. This realization is breathtaking in its simplicity and electrifying in its reality. Imagine it: a triune God, working through a preacher who is redeemed by His blood and conformed to the image of His Son, delivering His Word to bring Himself glory. You might want to stop here and praise Him. This reality is hardly comprehensible.

Ultimately, the New Testament is inspired *by* Christ, it is given to us *through* Christ, and it is written to draw attention *to* Christ as He *is glorified* in us.

But preaching Christ from the New Testament is the easier part of our task, because Christ's name is literally written all over the 27 books. It may seem a bit surprising, especially for a twenty-first-century Christian, that the entirety of the Old Testament is about Him as well.

Scripture Reveals Christ in the Old Testament

To say that we can see Christ in the Old Testament is not to suggest Jesus is embedded either physically or figuratively in every Old Testament narrative, law, poem, and prophecy. The Old Testament is, instead, a narrative that meanders through time and continents, pointing always toward its climax: the New Testament's revelation of Jesus, the Messiah, who redeems His bride and defeats His enemies. The Old Testament is a prelude to a Person. It leads us to the fulfillment of God's promises in Christ.

Consider Luke 24:27. When walking with two of His disciples, Jesus began with "Moses, and all the Prophets," and He "interpreted for them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures." This is a remarkable passage because those disciples saw for the first time the hermeneutic of God. God did not just tweak their thoughts. He taught them a whole new way to read the Old Testament. It was—and is—to be understood as an introduction. A prelude. A book intended to whet the appetite for things yet to come.

When Jesus explained to those disciples how to read the Old Testament, it revolutionized the way His followers thought. We see the result of their expositional study of the Old Testament in the very first Christian sermon, when Peter stood up and explained Jesus from three Old Testament texts: Joel 2, Psalm 16, and Psalm 110. We can only assume that after hearing Jesus explain Himself from the Old Testament, the disciples' newfound hermeneutic gave them a new way of preaching. They had personally experienced Him but were still preaching Christ from the Old Testament!

The point is clear: All Scripture has a storyline we might call "salvation history." Salvation history has its apex in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ and its consummation in the book of Revelation when God makes all things right.

As we read the Bible, Jesus, the Word incarnate, teaches us about Himself. If we skip around the Bible, gleaning snippets of truth here and there without ever grasping the big picture, we will never understand what Jesus wants us to know about Himself. This truth is both scary and tragic.

PREACHING JESUS

One rebuttal to an expositional method of preaching may come from a preacher who says he "just preaches Jesus" rather than delving into the nuances of specific Scripture passages. But how do we know who Jesus is apart from Scripture? If we do not know Scripture, then we really do not know Jesus—if you do not know the Word of God, you cannot know the God of the Word. We must not mistake a call to healthy simplicity for a misguided call to simplemindedness. If someone is proclaiming Christ without explaining Scripture, then where are they getting their picture of Christ? The vision of Christ that is presented must be reinvented from a source besides Scripture. In other words, if we don't learn who Christ is from Scripture, where else will we learn who Christ is? Aberrant theology grows when a pulpit is not seeding the Word. On the other hand, explaining Scripture is the God-ordained means to produce spiritual fruit (Matt 13:23).

To preach Jesus without preaching Scripture is to preach a Jesus we do not know. If Scripture is the means God chose to reveal Himself, then the message of Christ is only significant if it is tethered to the Scriptures. To say that we love Jesus but not the Bible is an exercise in self-delusion. If it were not for Scripture, we would never know that Jesus:

- is the great Shepherd over His sheep (Heb 13:20)
- hates when people twist Scripture (Luke 16:16–17)
- brings a truth that will divide families (Luke 12:49–53)
- seeks sinners (Luke 15–16)
- asks complete allegiance from His followers (Luke 9:23–27, 57–62)
- wants to spend time with us (Luke 10:38–41)
- calls us to pray boldly (Luke 11:5–13)

Without the Scriptures, you cannot understand who Christ is in the meaningful way God intended.

We are called to preach the message of Christ. To do so, we must understand what that message is. Not one person has ever become a Christian without hearing the Word of God—for how can they believe in Him of whom they have not heard (see Rom 10:14)? Beyond this, there is no meaningful growth in Christ without Scripture, for it is the very Word of God. Preaching that facilitates godly growth is preaching that takes care to explain Scripture. We preach the Bible because the Bible reveals Christ.

The Nature of the Call: Christ Calls Us to Die So Others Might Live

Preachers often struggle with self-perception. Are we to be like Billy Graham, calling masses to immediate response? Are we to be psychologists, working people through their personal problems? Are we simply to be communicators, trying to get ideas into our congregants' minds? Are we to be personifications of trendiness to show that God is relevant?

The internal struggle for pastoral identity has more to do with theology than it does cultural shifts. Consider how the apostle Paul described his identity as a preacher in 2 Cor 4:7–12:

Now we have this treasure in clay jars, so that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair; we are persecuted but not abandoned; we are struck down but not destroyed. We always carry the death of Jesus in our body, so that the life of Jesus may also be displayed in our body. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus's sake, so that Jesus's life may also be displayed in our mortal flesh. So then, death is at work in us, but life in you.

Paul's ambition was the Corinthians' spiritual health. To effect their growth he knew he must die to his own agenda and extend Christ to them. Knowing that preaching is dying to self so others might live curtails a preacher's inclination to please people or seek self-fulfillment. Many preachers' perpetual image management may be direr than it appears on the surface. We suspect it belies an insecurity that actually repels the unredeemed.

Christ died for us. We die for the people. This is our identity without reservation or hesitation. There is no unexposed corner to which we can retreat. Our will is lost in Christ's. The preacher of Christ is nothing but a tool that Christ uses to bring about His plans. We cannot save people, but we can labor—and suffer—for their sanctification. So, we surrender our wills to the One who surrendered His life to the Father. Through His death, people live. Through His suffering, congregations heal.

When we surrender our lives to the One who surrendered His life for us, we join Him in death and suffering—death to selfish ambition and the suffering that accompanies that path. Christ's death wasn't painless; it was a crucifixion. Neither will the preacher's death to self be painless. The crucified preacher is the template by which all preaching should be measured. Some may use the pulpit as a place to illustrate what great preachers they

are, to work out personal angst, to push a political agenda, or simply to vent. However, to use the pulpit in such a way is to treat it as a platform. But it's not a platform. It's a cross. Therefore, the best metaphor for preaching the gospel is the gospel itself: We are dead to self and raised to life in Christ, preaching a message of death to life in Christ so others might live.¹

Preaching can be a platform to dispense advice, a venue to help people with marital or financial problems, or an activity to arouse public opinion or engage the culture. While sermons can be used to do these things, if these things become their purpose, we have missed the function of the pulpit: to dispense the Word of God. Using the pulpit for these activities alone demonstrates a misunderstanding of how God's Word functions in the life of the believer and the church. Therefore, we must next explain how the Word is to function in the life of the church.

The Nature of the Church: The Word of God Sanctifies the Believer

Water is powerful. A docile lake or a peaceful ocean may seem tranquil and harmless, but if we unleash a dam or allow a river to run over its banks, we witness the raw power of water. The Word of God is equally powerful—a mighty, rushing river. Though, like water, it appears tranquil at times, we are tempted to view the Word as a book that is kind and gentle. Approaching it as little more than a self-help manual is to overlook its raw, unfathomable power.

Our ambition is not to dip into the Word and sprinkle people with doses of truth. Rather, we want to unleash the dam by fully immersing people in the Word of God. One reason we preach Scripture is because God designed it to be the means by which He sanctifies His people. Let's briefly look at three truths about the Word of God.

¹ Steven W. Smith, *Dying to Preach: Embracing the Cross in the Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009).

1. *The function of the Word of God in the lives of believers is to conform them to Christ's image.* In John 15:1–3, Jesus tells His disciples, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. Every branch in me that does not produce fruit he removes, and he prunes every branch that produces fruit so that it will produce more fruit. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.”
2. Here we see a unique function of the words of Christ: *they perform a verbal pruning.* Hearing and obeying the words of Christ requires acknowledging where we fall short of God's expectations and allowing Him to cut out harmful behaviors and attitudes. When we preach, we should be preaching Scripture, because Scripture alone has power to shape a person into the image of Christ and make him or her more effective at producing spiritual fruit.
3. *Thus, the more of the Word God's people hear, the more they will be like Christ.* How much they mirror Christ is proportionate to the amount of Scripture to which they are exposed. This is not absorption of dry exegesis. Rather, this is hungry consumption of the revelation of Jesus Christ through His Word, preached with boldness, compassion, force, and clarity. This Word is the agent the Holy Spirit uses for sanctification. Think of it this way: if the Spirit is the fire, the Word is the fuel. The more a believer is fueled by intake of God's Word, the hotter he or she will burn for Christ.
4. *What is true of a believer individually is true of the church corporately.* In Paul's comparison of marriage to the gospel, he encourages men, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word” (Eph 5:25–26). The husband is commanded to prepare his wife to meet her ultimate groom: Christ. This preparation is modeled for the husband in the way Christ makes His own bride, the church, pure by washing her with the Word.

Preaching may accomplish many things, but its main function in the life of the believer individually and the church corporately is to shape us

into the image of Christ. Any approach to preaching that aims for something different misses the point. The Word of God can help me with my problems, fix my marriage, and straighten out my finances. Those are important issues, but they are superficial compared to the ultimate goal of bringing glory to God by being shaped into the image of His Son. All those things can be a part of our sanctification, but that is just it: they are a *part*, not the whole. Christ is sanctifying us through His Word. Therefore, the ultimate aim of our preaching should be to bring every aspect of our lives into conformity to His.

So the question becomes something more personal: How can this sanctifying work occur in the people if it does not first occur in the preacher? How can the people live to Christ and die to self if the pulpit illustrates (verbally or nonverbally) that the preacher is very much alive to self? If the pulpit is a showcase for the preacher, how can people abandon their flesh and die to self?

The answer is, they can't. We are back to Paul's understanding of ministry. As we die, the people live. Puritan preacher Richard Baxter once said, "I preached as a dying man to dying men."² We suffer so they will thrive. This is the biblical understanding of ministry, and a biblical understanding of preaching. Still, someone might ask the question: where in the Bible does it say that we have to preach text-driven sermons? This is a good question.

Is Text-Driven Preaching Biblical?³

Is there a text in Scripture that defends this method? It would be tempting to answer with a reference to Paul's simple "Preach the Word" in 2 Tim 4:2. However, while Paul's admonition to Timothy is clear enough, it is a charge to explain Christ from all of Scripture more than it is a defense of

² Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1656; 2007), 174.

³ This section is adapted from Steven Smith's *Recapturing the Voice of God: Shaping Sermons Like Scripture* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015).

text-driven preaching. Citing it as an apologetic for text-driven preaching would be to ignore all the magnificent things it *is* saying!

The truth of the matter is that a simple proof text does not exist. The reason we wave the banner of text-driven preaching is not because of one isolated text. Text-driven preaching is a theologically driven philosophy of homiletics based on the implications of numerous biblical passages.

The rationale for text-driven preaching is found through answering a question: is it the pastor's responsibility to explain Scripture to his congregation? Our stance is clear, but before we explain ourselves, let us first note that many pastors seem to pick a weekly topic to address in light of Scripture rather than allow Scripture to inform their congregations. To answer our question, we could look at numerous sections of Scripture, but for brevity's sake let's restrict our search to Paul's words to Timothy and Titus in the Pastoral Epistles, since they explicitly deal with the role and function of a pastor. Look at this collection of verses from 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus:

Remain in Ephesus, so that you may instruct certain people not to teach false doctrine. (1 Tim 1:3)

An overseer, therefore, must be . . . able to teach. (1 Tim 3:2)

If you point these things out to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished by the words of the faith and the good teaching that you have followed. (1 Tim 4:6)

Command and teach these things. (1 Tim 4:11)

Until I come, give your attention to public reading, exhortation, and teaching. (1 Tim 4:13)

Pay close attention to your life and your teaching; persevere in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers. (1 Tim 4:16)

Command this also, so that they will be above reproach. (1 Tim 5:7)

Publicly rebuke those who sin, so that the rest will be afraid.
(1 Tim 5:20)

Teach and encourage these things. If anyone teaches false doctrine and does not agree with the sound teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and with the teaching that promotes godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing, but has an unhealthy interest in disputes and arguments over words. From these come envy, quarreling, slander, evil suspicions, and constant disagreement among people whose minds are depraved and deprived of the truth, who imagine that godliness is a way to material gain. (1 Tim 6:2–5)

Hold on to the pattern of sound teaching that you have heard from me. (2 Tim 1:13)

What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, commit to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. (2 Tim 2:2)

Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to fight about words. (2 Tim 2:14)

Be diligent to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who doesn't need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth. (2 Tim 2:15)

So if anyone purifies himself from anything dishonorable, he will be a special instrument, set apart, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work. (2 Tim 2:21)

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed. You know those who taught you, and you know that from infancy you have known the sacred Scriptures. (2 Tim 3:14–15)

All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness . . . (2 Tim 3:16)

I solemnly charge you before God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and because of his appearing and his kingdom: Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; rebuke, correct, and encourage with great patience and teaching. (2 Tim 4:1–2)

. . . holding to the faithful message as taught, so that he will be able both to encourage with sound teaching and to refute those who contradict it. (Titus 1:9)

But you are to proclaim things consistent with sound teaching. (Titus 2:1)

From these texts alone, no matter what else Paul expected Timothy and Titus to do, it is clear he at the very least expected them to explain the Word of God to the people. This handful of passages from three relatively short books contains more than a dozen admonitions to explain the truth of Scripture. If we couple this with Paul's statements about protecting revealed truth (1 Tim 1:11; 6:20; 2 Tim 1:12, 14), the case is even stronger for the responsibility of pastors to explain the truth of Scripture to the people. Someone is responsible for explaining the Word of God in any gathering intended to draw people closer to the God of the Word.

Now that a case has been made for the pastor's role as a Scripture expositor, expository preaching is the only answer to this question. Text-driven preaching is not a style; it is a theologically driven philosophy of preaching. It is a method that facilitates a mandate.

Conclusion

In the following chapters we will discuss the nuts and bolts of preparing a text-driven sermon. But it was essential to lay a foundation for the why behind the how before proceeding. This may sound odd, but this book is not calling you to embrace a methodology. Methodologies will change from time to time. And they should. What we are committed to is the simple

belief that God has revealed Himself in Scripture and that we need to adopt the method that best allows us to share His revelation.

What follows is a template that helps us faithfully live out our theology and is a good method only inasmuch as it is faithful to our theology of preaching.

So, what is a text-driven sermon?

Discussion Questions

1. If the Word is the agent used by the Holy Spirit for sanctification, how does this impact our view of Scripture and, ultimately, our theology of preaching?
2. Text-driven preaching is a philosophy that emanates from a high view of Scripture. How does this philosophy of preaching influence our method of preaching?
3. Read Luke 24:27. Luke records Jesus revealing Himself through the Old Testament Scriptures. How does this verse, specifically, impact a theology of preaching?
4. The preacher dies so that others may live. How does this manifest itself on a week-to-week basis for preachers?

Recommended Reading

Adam, Peter. *Speaking God's Word: A Practical Theology of Expository Preaching*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.

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MacArthur, John, Jr. *Rediscovering Expository Preaching: Balancing the Science and Art of Biblical Exposition*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992.

Meyer, Jason C. *Preaching: A Biblical Theology*. Wheaton: IL, Crossway, 2013.

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2

What Is Text-Driven Preaching?¹

Preaching is more than explaining Scripture, but it's certainly not less. The purpose of this book is to teach a method that will allow the preacher to explain or exposit a text of Scripture in the sermon. The method of preaching that faithfully accomplishes this is often called *expository*, *expositional*, or *text-driven* preaching. The three terms will be used interchangeably. Since “expositional preaching” can mean many things to many people, it would help to begin with a discussion of what it is not.

Text-driven preaching is not an exegetical Bible study. Some preachers tend to use the pulpit to bring to light many fascinating nuances of a text. The biblical text *is* fascinating. However, a majority of what we uncover in the study will never make it to the pulpit. The point of the pulpit, ultimately, is not information but transformation. We dispense the Word so the Spirit will work in the lives of our congregation.

Text-driven preaching is not a heavily outlined sermon. Sometimes a weighty outline, with points and subpoints, is a fair representation

¹ A version of this chapter originally appeared in Smith's *Recapturing the Voice of God* (see chap 1, n. 3).

of the structure of the text. But the preacher searching for points is tempted to extract points from the text that do not accurately represent its message. Sometimes—most times—the text is simpler than three points. Sometimes it is more complicated. While a thick outline may occasionally be needed, we are not advocating outlining for the sake of outlining. The text itself will determine the structure of the outline.

Text-driven preaching is not necessarily preaching “verse by verse.” Some believe they are doing text-driven, expository preaching simply because they are preaching consecutively through books of the Bible. However, it is possible to preach consecutively through a book and never get the point of the individual passages within the book. Likewise, it is possible to preach on a topic using individual passages, and miss the context for which they were intended. Merely working through a text without proper context is a pitfall to be avoided.

The preacher preparing an expositional sermon must remember that many suppositions about expositional preaching, and even Scripture itself, are incorrect. Since much exposition is done sequentially through a text, an easy mistake is to adhere rigidly to a set number of verses for each sermon. It is important to remember that chapter and verse divisions were added long after the text was written. The text, not the verse structure, is inspired. Here are two other misconceptions about expositional preaching:

An expositional sermon is a boring sermon. A boring sermon is most certainly not a text-driven sermon. Since neither the text of Scripture nor the truth it contains is boring, a sermon that accurately reflects the text cannot bore a Spirit-filled listener. If I preach a boring sermon, it's on me. God is not boring. When He speaks, it is not boring. A sermon that is boring does not accurately present what is going on in the text.

An expositional sermon is a confusing sermon. Scripture can be complicated. However, the purpose of Scripture is to reveal God, not conceal Him. A sermon that confuses people often comes from a preacher who has not done the hard work of making the text clear. Whatever else a sermon does, it should provide clarity by explaining the single point of the text. In this sense, all text-driven sermons are topical sermons; the text-driven sermon simply lets the text determine the topic.

So, what is expository, text-driven preaching?

Text-driven preaching is the interpretation and communication of a biblical text in a sermon that re-presents the substance, structure, and the spirit of the text.

Before we unpack this definition let's look at what it *does not* include.

Reading things into the text that are not there. There is a problem if a preacher says, "I have my idea. I just don't have a text to go with it." Having a great sermon idea and then finding a text to support it opens up the possibility of forcing a text into a box where it does not fit. As believers, and most certainly as preachers, we shouldn't come up with ideas and then search for texts to justify them. We are to be in the Word until it speaks through us. We shouldn't just study the Bible to preach. We should preach because we've studied the Bible. The Word flows out of our time spent with the Lord. God's Word is not to be our megaphone. We are to be its megaphone. It is our task to re-present what God has said.

Emphasizing the second- or third-level of meaning of a text as if it were the primary meaning. Oftentimes a sermon that follows this model will use a text completely out of its context. Other times it will take an application of a text and treat it as if it were the text's primary meaning. Occasionally, there is a place for expositing the second- and third-level meanings of a text when preaching a passage and wanting to show connections throughout Scripture. But this is an exception that should not become our rule.

So, let's focus on what this definition *does* mean by highlighting each of the keywords it contains.

Interpretation

In the process of interpretation, we answer the question, “What does this text mean?” To answer this question, we study the text in the original language using all the exegetical tools at our disposal—not to flex our research muscles or our superb grasp of ancient languages, but for the sole purpose of understanding what the text means. I (Robby) rarely mention the Greek or Hebrew word in a sermon unless it is transliterated into English. An example of this would be the Greek word *gumnazo*, which is where we get the English word *gymnasium* (see 1 Tim. 4:7, where it is translated “train”). Typically, interpreting a text correctly should constitute half of the pastor's sermon preparation time; however, there are exceptions to this rule of thumb because some passages demand more time than others for accurate interpretation.

The temptation, of course, is to shortcut this process: to try to figure out *how* to communicate the text before we know *what* the text actually communicates. It is possible to find a way to say something before we figure out what the text says, but this is a dangerous way to approach the Word of God. *Remember: we are not preaching sermons; we are preaching texts.* We are re-presenting what God has already said. Speechmaking is not difficult; re-presenting the Word of God is. The secret of “great” preaching is often found in staying at the task until the meaning of the text is clear. So, the first part of preaching is the interpretation of the text. The end result of this process is an exegetical outline—the raw ingredients of the sermon, but not yet ready to preach.

Getting Closer by Stepping Back

When preparing a sermon, it is easy to get stuck wondering what a text means, even after years of preparing text-driven sermons. Sometimes this

kind of roadblock appears because we haven't spent enough time in the Scripture.

Yet not every case of interpretation block is caused by lack of study. In fact, when many of us reach this kind of block, our response is to dig in and study *harder*. We put in more hours on the passage, zoom the lens in as tight as possible to see every nuance in focus, and still don't feel confident we know what the text means. One reason for this is that sometimes the meaning of the text is not in the words alone. We may have to look for the meaning of the text in its surroundings. I (Steven) personally experienced this solution while trying to interpret the difficult parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19–31. I studied the text but could not get a good handle on what it was saying. So, I honed my focus and dug into the semantic structure of the sentences and the meaning of the individual words. And yet, the more I drilled down, the further I got from the meaning of the text. What I needed was to pan out.

If you pan out to the previous chapter, you see that the parable is the last of five parables dealing with lostness (15:1–16:31): four positive examples followed by a negative one. In the first four, Jesus was painting a picture of how He views lostness—He seeks people and loves them more than anything. Then He chastised the Pharisees for loving money and tampering with the Word of God (16:14–18) and shared the story of a man who loved money more than he loved people (16:19–20) and who had a low view of Scripture (16:27–31). That wide-angle view helped me realize that this provocative parable, which includes a scene in hell, is not really about hell at all. In fact, it contains no new information about hell that is not affirmed in other Scriptures. Jesus did not have to defend hell; His audience assumed its existence. Jesus wasn't trying to describe hell. He was describing the kind of people who go there: people who love things more than they love people and who have a low view of Scripture. Their character is diametrically opposed to that of our seeking, saving heavenly Father. The panned-out view of this passage fits with Luke's overall theme of Christ reaching out to the weak and marginalized. The meaning in this case isn't found in the minutiae, but in the macro.

Imagine you are in the Louvre in Paris. You have full access all by yourself to study the *Mona Lisa*. You stand 25 feet away and realize you don't really understand the painting. So, you move closer, and with every step you appreciate it more. Then, you move your eyes so near the canvas that you can see the brushstrokes. You can smell the dust. You find this close perspective interesting, but you realize there is a limitation to this view as well. You are *too* close.

Similarly, there are two temptations when it comes to interpreting a text: to stand so far away from the text that we don't understand it, and to get so close that we miss the big picture. Both perspectives have their places, but they should be held in dynamic tension. The process of interpretation involves zooming in to the micro level of the text to understand word usage and syntax, but also panning out to the surrounding context to see how God uses it to communicate His truth. Both the micro and the macro views are essential to determining meaning.

The interpretive process is the exegetical process in sermon development. At this stage, we read over the text many times before using all the exegetical tools we have to discover its meaning. Once we know what the text says, we formulate a plan for how to deliver it.

Communication

Now that we know what the text says, we must answer the question, "How do we say it?" Now is when we work out by preaching what has been worked into us by study. Communication of Scripture's truth refers partially to the delivery, but more importantly to the process of composing a sermon that best presents the text.

Here lies another temptation. Once the exegetical work is complete and we know what the text means, the temptation is to present the meaning of the text in any homiletic form we like. It is important to remember, however, that the shape of the sermon is not arbitrary. *Ideally, a text-driven sermon's shape is based on the substance, structure, and spirit of the text.*

Substance

The substance of a text is its meaning. Because our first step in preparing a text-driven sermon was the interpretation of the text, we should have arrived at an exegetical idea—a summary of the text in one sentence. Just as the process of interpretation yields the meaning of the text, the process of communication yields a main idea—the point of the sermon in one sentence. The main idea of the sermon is the long story short.

Let's look at an example of how not to do this: the sermon I (Steven) heard on tithing from John 3:16. The point of the sermon was that God so loved the world that He gave, so we too must dig deep and give. After all, wasn't the point of the text giving—and giving generously? Surely it applies to financials! God gave, so we should give too.

God certainly did give, and we are supposed to give as well. Both of those principles are in fact true. The problem with that sermon wasn't what was said, but what was not said. Since we have but a limited time behind the pulpit, everything we say is to the exclusion of something else. The issue was not that John 3:16 is irrelevant to giving. The problem is that the preacher overlooked the richness of Christ's atonement for our sins for the sake of a strained application. Preaching that makes "points" from a text but avoids the meaning of the text makes our people vulnerable to believing heresy.

By preaching on financial giving from John 3:16, the preacher missed a prime opportunity to communicate the incredible grace of God to us in the atoning work of Christ. Sitting under such preaching, people may never grow to maturity in their understanding of the faith and thus may become vulnerable to the enemy's attacks, to spiritual slippage, to taking the things of God for granted. This is the real problem.

Failing to communicate the meaning of the text is not lying to people, but it prepares our people to accept lies as truths. With sermons like these, people can sit under our preaching for years and not know basic Bible doctrine because we have reduced difficult, rich, and meaningful texts to a compilation of practical points for living. Our sheep become vulnerable because

they do not know the Word. They sit under preachers who extract things from a text and call it exposition, but never deal with the text in context. Such preachers are not false prophets, but they are negligent shepherds.

I do not believe such preachers intend to mislead anybody, but they overlook the most important part of our job, which is to articulate the Word for the people. To do this, we need to be sure the meaning we deliver reflects not just the substance of the text, but the structure and spirit of the text as well. *A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text.* By stripping passages from their original context, preachers can manipulate texts to prove any idea they desire.

Structure

The way a text is structured influences its meaning. God could have told us to have faith in Him alone for our salvation because He always keeps His covenant promises. However, instead of stating what He means in a sentence, He presents us with the stories of David, Daniel, Abraham, and others. The message is deeper because it is embedded in the form of narrative.

In the 176 verses of Psalm 119, God could have given us a list of 176 reasons why we should love the Word of God, but instead He constructed an amazing poem. That psalm is rich and nuanced, with the particulars of genre making the text come to life. To present it as flat and one-dimensional is to misrepresent the poetic way it was written.

Recognizing the structure of biblical texts has given me (Steven) more freedom in preaching than anything else I can imagine. Also, it is incredibly practical. If a text has four points, I preach a sermon with four points. When I preach a narrative that has no easily discernible points, my sermon has no points. When I preach a parable that has three scenes and a warning from Christ at the end, my sermon reflects that structure. For the rest of my life, how to structure a sermon will always be a secondary question. The primary question is always, how is the text structured? By answering this question, the structure of a sermon on that text will naturally take shape. The scenes of the story become the structure of the sermon because they

may communicate points themselves, or, more likely, they will lead to one major, overarching point. This approach does not abdicate creative thinking on the part of the preacher. It simply moves us out of the way so the message God intends is the message that gets spoken.

Structuring a sermon this way protects us from two extremes: (1) slavish adherence to a fixed homiletic template; and (2) a line-by-line commentary on the text. The former can misrepresent the text by forcing a human-imposed structure, and the second can misrepresent the text by ignoring its structure altogether. Both extremes don't consider that there is meaning in the structure of the text. So be liberated! Let the text breathe. You are free from having to cram it into a structure you build or fear your sermon will sound too much like someone else.

At this point it might be good to clarify exactly what is meant by the structure of the text informing the structure of the sermon. We are not trading one set of strictures for another. We are not trading in an old homiletic structure for a new one. We are not, as someone has said, "form fundamentalists." And most important, we are not suggesting the sermon can exactly mimic the text. Structuring a sermon like the paragraph unit of an epistle is natural: once you observe the verbs in the text and note the coordinating and subordinate clauses, a natural structure automatically takes shape. But lifting the structure of poetry, wisdom literature, or law and using that as the sermon structure may be challenging. What we are after is not strict imitation, but reanimation, meaning, at most the sermon will follow the exact same structure as the text; at the very least the preacher understands how the structure influences meaning and re-presents the text in a way that considers the meaning provided by the text's structure. This will inject life into our spoken words as we deliver the Lord's message.

As an aside, this approach to preaching does not limit the amount of Scripture a sermon can cover. A text-driven sermon is not bound by length of text. There are exegetical concerns (e.g., identifying the natural divisions of the text) and pastoral concerns (e.g., identifying the receptivity level of my audience to the text) that will influence how many verses to cover.

Spirit

By *spirit*, we mean the author-intended emotional design of the text (not to be mistaken for the Holy Spirit; notice the lowercase *s*). The most obvious element of a text's spirit is the genre. A poem feels different from a letter. A prophetic warning feels different from wisdom literature. So we learn something from the genre. However, genre alone does not dictate the mood of a text. Sometimes a text's mood is unexpected given the genre: the prophets warn poetically; the epistles encourage; parables edify and challenge. The genre of a passage helps us understand the tone of the text, but each genre is not limited to communicating only one particular tone. Rather, each unit of Scripture has its own mood, determined by what the Holy Spirit intended for us to hear.

For example, Paul's letter to the Galatians is filled with in-your-face warnings. The letter of 1 Thessalonians is filled with warm paternal metaphors. The parable of the sower (Matt 13:1–23) gives great hope that the kingdom will experience exponential growth. The parable of the dragnet (Matt 13:47–50) warns that those who reject the kingdom will be thrown out. In the same chapter, the moods of encouragement and warning are both present. We could go on, but the idea is clear. Some Scripture texts feel different from others. The spirit of the text, then, becomes the spirit, or emotion, of the sermon. Only when the sermon reflects the substance, structure, and spirit of the text is it text-driven or expositional.

Conclusion

We used the illustration earlier of viewing the *Mona Lisa* to describe the process of zooming in and panning out. Both are necessary to experience all the things the artist wants you to see. It's true that art can be appreciated with a limited perspective—either zooming in or panning out. However, the real art lover, who desires to understand art at both the micro and macro levels, must both zoom in and pan out to get a complete picture of the work he is studying.

This is also true of Scripture. Scripture is written by a perfect Author. It is meaningful with even a cursory reading. However, one can clarify, affirm, and sharpen its meaning with deeper, focused study. Such study uncovers facts that were apparent to first-century readers but are not immediately evident to twenty-first-century readers. As we pan out further, we discover fascinating connections between the Old and New Testaments of which the original human authors may not have been aware and that could only be orchestrated by the single, perfect Author of Scripture. With the advantage of a completed canon of Scripture, we can look at the macro view and understand what an individual text means in light of Scripture as a whole. This might seem daunting, so how do we do this?

The best approach, in a perfect world, would be to have a functioning knowledge of the entire scriptural canon *before* we approach the text. Then, when we studied an individual text, we could connect the dots and make every connection in our minds from our vast knowledge of Scripture. Moving from the macro level of Scripture to the micro level of an individual text makes the most logical sense.

Practically, however, it rarely works that way. We know very few people with an intimate, immediate knowledge of Scripture as a whole. While we want to have as much information as we can before we approach a text, especially when preaching through a book, the reality is that we don't know what questions to ask until we have studied the text closely and discovered the meaning. In reality, it makes more sense to zoom in to the individual text first and then pan out to see this individual text in light of the whole. Therefore, this is how we will approach the text:

First, we zoom in. We will try to discover the internal frame of the text and answer the questions, "How is this text structured?" and "What does it mean?"

Second, we pan out. We will try to discover how the meaning of the text is influenced by its place in the chapter, the book, and the

whole of Scripture. Then we will determine how all this information informs a sermon on the text.

So, let's get to it. How do you understand the internal frame of the text?

Discussion Questions

1. A text-driven sermon reflects the structure of the biblical text. Explain the difference between slavishly copying the structure of the text in a sermon and allowing the text's structure to inform the sermon.
2. Consider the definition given for text-driven preaching. It is "the interpretation and communication of a biblical text in a sermon that represents the substance, structure, and spirit of the text." How does the preacher determine the text's spirit, or the emotive design of the text?
3. What does it mean to zoom in or to pan out?
4. Why is it necessary to zoom in and pan out in the interpretive process?

Recommended Reading

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