

Preaching As If It Were A Matter Of Life and Death

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Webster's Third International Dictionary gives us one definition of preaching, "exhorting in officious and tiresome manner." Madonna sang a song titled, "Papa Don't Preach." The question for the 21st century pastor is simply this, "Why do we preach?" There have been wonderful put-downs related to preaching throughout history: "Preaching is the monstrous monologue of a moron to mutes." So why bother? The most basic act of revelation other than the incarnation is speech. God is a talking God. That's the first thing we read. God spoke. Jesus is called the Word. This is the most basic way to speak of Christ. This simple fact is what guides and drives preachers each week to proclaim and teach God's Word. The foundational pre-supposition for this manual and for all preaching, is that God indeed wants to communicate with the people that He has created. One of His primary means is communicating through the spoken word. This is a daunting task and a task that requires the commitment of the mind, the heart, the body, and the soul.

There are several excellent books and resources available today for pastors and leaders who want to grow in the area of preaching. We strongly encourage you to look into each of the resources that are listed in Appendix A. One of the challenging things related to the mass amount of information on preaching is that there is *so much* that has been written. The focus of this manual is to assist the preacher in sermon preparation *and* to do this with some amount of brevity. Whether you are a beginning preacher, a student worker that teaches weekly in a gathering of students (secondary, university, or other), or a veteran preacher, this manual is designed to assist you as you think about preaching, as you prepare a message, and as you train others to teach. The hope for this manual is that the preaching in your setting or in your congregation will be honoring to Christ; will be clear and challenging for the people you are communicating with; and that you as a preacher will grow in competence.

How to Use This Manual

This manual was designed with the practitioner in mind. Therefore, the layout and the decision to leave some things out of this manual is by intention. Again, you will find plenty of good material on preaching in the books that we reference throughout this book and the books listed at the end of this manual. What makes this manual unique is that it will assist you throughout the actual preparation of your message. This manual can be read in any order.

You can read the manual from the front to the back as it was designed, moving from a broader view of preaching to the more specific application of actual sermon preparation. You can also jump to specific sections and get immediate benefit from these stand-alone chapters.

You may also find the appendices in this manual helpful. We have included a list of resources that have proven to be very useful in preaching; Two manuscripts from actual messages; The essentials of sermon preparation – what a typical week could look like; and a humorous, but insightful article entitled, “Stupid Things that Preachers Do.” It is our hope and prayer that this manual will help you communicate God’s Word more effectively whether you’re pastoring a church, planting a church, leading a student fellowship, or teaching a small group Bible study. Whatever level of gifting God has given you to preach, this resource can sharpen and inspire you to greater effectiveness in God’s kingdom.

1: The Value of Preaching

D.A. Carson has acknowledged the debate over the “Need of the Hour?” (Carson)

- Need for counseling, therapy, and addiction recovery.
- Need for uprightness in financial management.
- Need for justice for the poor.
- Need for renewal meetings and spiritual phenomena.
- Need for better, stronger families.

As a pastor of a local church, I say “Yes!” to all of these. But, one thing we *desperately need* is to know God better.

Now, the problems with the devaluation of proclamation are numerous. For one thing, I think that Vineyard pastors, and pastors in general, have become increasingly confused about what their primary role is. Pastor, what is your *primary job description*? And more and more, as Eugene Peterson has rightly pointed out, the pastor’s job description has become that of manager, therapist, something other than preacher. I would love for Vineyard pastors to stand up and say, “My primary job is to do the hard work of relating the truth of God’s Word to life in my community today. That while I have people and processes to manage, and while I also do counseling and leadership development and lots of other different kinds of things, at the very heart of what I do, I’m a preacher. I work hard, I sweat, and I labor to relate the truth of God’s Word to the people that I’m ministering to week by week.” Now, people will object to this being the primary job of a pastor, because they will say preaching no longer works.

People will say that preaching doesn’t work because it is a monologue.

- Always hear preaching as an educational experience = weakest form of communication
- Dialogue = better
- Small Groups = better

When have you been in a small group that seriously confronted heart and mind? In most groups there is either no substance or minimal substance. People almost never say, “WOW, that discussion opened up God’s Word to me in a life changing way.” We love the relationships. We love the community. But small groups cannot do what preaching does.

Another reason why people have lost faith in preaching is *because they have lost sight of man’s basic problem*. If people’s basic problem is social then what we need to do is provide them with avenues for meeting their social needs—groups and friendships and fun activities (maybe do social works) and those kinds of things. If people’s needs are economic, then we need to provide them with food, clothing and shelter. If people’s basic need is psychological and emotional, then we need to provide them with counseling and with group sessions and therapy. But if people’s basic problem is, as the Bible says it is – sin, then the way to deal with sin is to preach salvation. Now as

soon as we begin to realize people's basic problem, and that is the problem of sin, and that the need of people is salvation, then teaching will again regain some of its primacy.

There is the *problem of false antitheses or false conflicts*. During times of renewal we regularly hear people say that the presence of the Lord is so strong "we haven't preached for three weeks or a month and a half." What a tragedy. Why set the Word against the Holy Spirit? Rather, why not enjoy a fresh Pentecost that was more than just a spiritual experience. The miracle of Pentecost was that people got to hear God's Word in "our own language." (Acts 2) By false antitheses or false conflicts I mean there is a tendency in the church today to set teaching over against the works of Jesus or teaching over against worship, teaching over against the sacraments, teaching over against counseling. My own view is that preaching and teaching are primary, but it is not the only thing done in the church. Here in Vineyard we talk frequently about the words and works of Jesus. We need to be involved with both. So we don't have to set them against each other.

The truth is that we have no Christian church, if there is not a central place for preaching the Bible. We have no disciples, if people aren't taught to believe and do what the apostles taught them to believe and do. If we give up our primary place for preaching, then our worship becomes vacuous, it becomes empty. The reason why some Vineyard songs have historically been so bereft of content is because we have not seen that preaching the word and worshipping God were all part of the same package. That worship was more than just singing, that our public worship also involved the preaching of God's Word. You can't have great worship without great preaching because people need to know *who* it is they are worshipping.

2: The Origin of Preaching

The origin of preaching is found in God himself. God is called a God of truth. God is not only a God of truth, but he has spoken to us as human creatures (Hebrews 1:1-3). In creating us in his image, we human beings speak to God and to one another. God has created us to think, hear and to speak. The origin of the sermon is rooted in the Bible. We read in 2 Peter 2:6 that Noah was a “preacher of righteousness.” There are dozens of examples of people in the Bible preaching. So we have, for example, the farewell addresses of Joshua. Ezra is called a “teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given him.” He is said to “have devoted himself to the study and observance of the law of the Lord and to teaching its decrees in Israel.” In the book of Nehemiah, we see Ezra opening the book, the people standing up in reverence, and Ezra leading them in praise. Then the Levites join him in “making [God’s Word] clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read” (Neh. 8:8).

The Christian sermon is really rooted in the synagogue service. Before the time of Jesus we have records of Jewish teachers reading the scriptures, translating it into the vernacular of the day, and then giving an explanatory exposition, which wove in not only their own thoughts, but also the thoughts of other interpreters. Of course, it is Jesus himself whose example gives us the priority of preaching. Over and over we read this purpose clause in Jesus’ ministry that “he left there in order to preach.” *One of the central tasks that Jesus laid upon his followers was the task of preaching.* Jesus said to his followers, “As you go, preach this message, the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matt. 10:7). We are told in Mark 3:14, “He appointed twelve, designating them apostles that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.” In Mark 16:15, we read, “He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation...’” And in Luke 9:2, we read that he sent “disciples out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.”

The primacy of teaching in the early church is found in the example of the apostles. The *first thing* we see Peter doing, having been filled with the Holy Spirit, is preaching. The apostles neglect everything else so that they can give their attention to prayer and to the ministry of the Word, to preaching. The first thing we read the apostle Paul doing upon being converted is Luke’s statement, “At once he began to preach in the synagogue that Jesus is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20).

3: The Value of Preaching: Proclamation

Preaching is one of the most exciting things to which any person can be called. The scripture says that *it's through preaching or teaching that God saves sinful people*. It is the primary way the Kingdom of God goes forward. "How can people call upon Him whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him whom they've never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent? As it is written: How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news...so faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes from the preaching of Christ. (Romans 10:14-17)

Paul talks about the importance of preaching over and over again in his epistles. He speaks of the eagerness to preach to the Romans in Romans 1:15. He tells the Corinthians "God was pleased through the foolishness of what we preached to save those who believed." Paul sums up his ministry in the book of Ephesians this way, "Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this place was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8). And in the famous text that is binding upon 21st century pastors as much as it was binding upon the apostle Paul, Paul states, "Woe to me if I preach not the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16).

The church, from the beginning, elevated the office of preaching. So we read about John of Antioch, who was called Chrysostom, the golden mouthed one. We have a thousand of his sermons. He declared the joy that he felt in preaching when he said: "Preaching makes me well. As soon as I open my mouth to speak, my weariness is forgotten." John Wycliff, who was the forerunner of the Reformation, living back in the 14th century, has this to say, "The highest service that any person can attain to on the earth is to preach the Word of God...for this cause, Jesus Christ left other works and occupied Himself in preaching and so did His apostles and for this God loved them..."

The Reformation was all about the restoration of preaching to the central place in life of the church. Replacing what was seen by what was heard, from visual to auditory. From mass and drama of the masses to preaching of God's Word. The Reformation involved a revival of preaching. The pulpit in Reformation Churches was higher than the altar. Reformers elevated preaching over the celebration of the Mass. Martin Luther has left us 2300 sermons. The heroes of Christian history contain a high percentage of great preachers – people like John Knox of Scotland, John Wesley, George Whitfield, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, Phillips Brooks, D.L. Moody, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Will Willimon.

Dr. Harry Stout ascribes the importance of the sermon on the formation of the American Republic. Stout writes that the average New Englander heard 7000 sermons in their lifetime amounting to approximately 15,000 hours of concentrated listening. He says, "The people of New England before the Revolution were unique people of the Word. The meeting house's position at the center of the community signified submission to God's power, the power that came to a people who subordinated all human authorities

and institutions to the infallible rule of *sola scriptura*.” People’s lives, thoughts, views in New England were shaped to a large degree by what they were hearing from the pulpit.

Cotton Mather was an American Puritan in the 17th century and had this to say: “The great design and intention for Christian teachers is to restore the throne and the dominion of God in the souls of men; to display in living color and to proclaim in the clearest language the wonderful perfections, offices and grace of the Son of God; and to attract the souls of men into a state of everlasting friendship with Him...it is a work which an angel might wish for, as an honor to his character; an office which every angel in heaven might covet to be employed in for thousands of years to come.”

Will Sangster, who was a preacher at Westminster back in the 50’s said this:

“...called to preach, commissioned by God to teach God’s Word! A herald of the great King! A witness of the eternal gospel! Could any work be more high and holy? To this supreme test God sent His only begotten Son. In all of the frustration and confusion of the times, it is possible to imagine a work comparable in importance with that of proclaiming the will of God to sinful people? Not by accident, nor by the egotism of men, was teaching given the central place in Reform churches. It is there by design and devotion. It is there by the logic of things. It is there as the throne of the Word of God.”

There is an idea combating these historical perspectives, that in the midst of all the pluralism of today, that people won’t sit still for some authoritative word. This is about the most specious argument of all. What do people believe was the environment at the time the apostles were preaching? You talk about philosophical pluralism! The apostles didn’t give up the hard work of relating God’s Word to their culture. *Rather*, in the face of their extraordinarily diverse world, the apostles knew that they would prevail because they were confident that what they were preaching was true: that Christ had, indeed, risen from the dead; that he had no rivals; that he would brook no compromise.

Let me give you my bottom line. We dare not move away from giving away, preaching and proclamation, from the very central place that scriptures gives it in our churches and our job descriptions. We dare not ever find ourselves running down the value of preaching because of some change in culture. We dare not substitute for the apostolic deposits some other content, the latest, greatest, most phenomenal managerial or philosophical or therapeutic insight.

Do you know that Eusebius, in the 4th century said that the mark of the heretic was innovation. Today, we take being innovative as a compliment. Come, visit this church which is one of the most innovative churches in America. And we are all trying to be more innovative than one another, and more cutting edge. In the early church, if you called a pastor innovative, that was a major offense. You were saying about that man that he had departed from the apostolic faith. And I’ll tell you what, friends, in all the shifting winds of culture, and all the things that blow into the church and blow out, what we are always going to come back to, what God’s Spirit is always going to lead us back

to, is preaching. You see, all of our human devices, all of our programs, and all of our ways of structuring church and our various processes, all of that stuff will pass away. As Isaiah says, "Cry out. What is it that I should cry out? All flesh is grass and all of its beauty like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows upon it. Surely, the people are grass. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our God endures forever."

4: The Challenge of Contemporary Preaching

Now, I don't want to take an enormous amount of time on this point. There are several good books that address this issue specifically. I've actually written a couple of chapters regarding some of my present thinking about how the church needs to respond to what is a very definite philosophical shift in our culture in a recent book I wrote called Who is My Enemy? In my book I said that I felt that postmodernism has done a tremendous service to the church and to the cause of Christ in dismantling the modernist project. There has been for the last couple of hundred years at least certain assumptions, a certain philosophical approach to life and to the gospel – a certain lens through which people look at life, that was really antithetical to the gospel and a biblical world view. There were a number of assumptions of modernism that needed to be dismantled. And postmodernism has been the tool that the Lord has used to dismantle some of these assumptions.

Assumptions of the Modern Worldview

For example, dismantling the assumption of the inevitable progress of humanity. The idea that we are more moral, more compassionate, more tolerant, less war like, happier, than our ancestors were. That things are getting better and better every day. Postmodernists look at the last century with its train loads of Jews being delivered to German gas chambers, they look at Soviet gulags and Chinese brainwashing, and ethnic cleansing, and they say, "We are not getting better and better in every way every day." That instead of evolution, we are experiencing devolution. We are spiraling down. The fact that our technology is improving doesn't mean that we are improving.

Postmodernism has been very helpful in dismantling the extreme confidence that people have placed in human rationality. There has been an over-emphasis on intellect and a denial of any role for emotions or intuition.

And of course, something that is very near and dear to our hearts that postmodernism has helped in dismantling is the belief that nature is all that exists, what is known as naturalism. The philosophical commitment that says we can know nothing of the supernatural. Even within the Vineyard Movement, there was an evangelical deism that John Wimber was contending with and there were various seminal articles that affected our movement, like Paul Hiebert's "The Flaw of The Excluded Middle", or Charles Kraft's Christianity with Power. Many of the modernist assumptions, that it is the naturalism of modernism that denied the supernatural, the rationalism of modernism that denied a place for emotions and experience and mystery, the individualism of modernism that denied a place for community and relationship – many of these things have been appropriately critiqued by postmodernism. And in my book I applaud the critique.

The Problem of Cultural and Biblical Illiteracy

Studies indicate that 61% of Americans cannot benefit from the average high school textbook. That is not because the average high school textbook is so poorly written.

Eric Hirsch has written extensively about the broader problem in his book title *Cultural Illiteracy*. He identifies 5000 terms, names, events, dates, which are needed as shared information in our country, but are unknown by a growing group in our society.

Simply watch Jay Leno's "Jay Walking" in which Jay asks people on the street to identify people in photos such as the President. Or ask people to identify famous buildings like the Washington Monument. The ignorance of folks is staggering. I read a study of high school seniors, which indicated that a majority of high school seniors could correctly identify only 2-3 of the United States, if they were unmarked – Florida, California, and perhaps their own home state. Some of you are feeling pretty smart, now, aren't you? Much of our audiences are biblically illiterate. You simply cannot assume that a quick reference to David and Bathsheba will communicate anything.

The Problem of Overstimulation

Every household has the television running at an average of 7-hours a day. People are subject to an unrelenting barrage of images, sights and sounds. A major objection to teaching and preaching is with the amount of entertainment people are exposed to (for example, people watch 35 hours of TV a week), with the amount of eyeball popping chase scenes and so on, car crashes and fight scenes and everything else people are exposed to, they simply will not be able to listen to a person standing and monologuing for 30 minutes. I'm concerned that more and more emphasis is being placed on "entertainment" in our worship services. Don't misunderstand me, I very much see the value and usefulness of drama, testimonies, multi-media, but I'm more or less a minimalist. The Word of God is so often buried. I think there are a number of things that could be said in response to this objection that people will not be able to listen to a monologue for 30-40 minutes.

I like the saying that "people are not generally bored with preaching. They may get bored with our preaching, but it is not with preaching in general that people are bored." In fact, I believe that people will come out and listen to good teaching – teaching that meets their needs, is relevant, has a certain level of conviction behind it, teaching that shows respect for the listeners and so on. So my own conviction is that it isn't teaching or preaching that people are bored with. Very often it is bad preaching and teaching that they are bored with. No one wants to sit through 35 minutes of a talk that was thrown together on Saturday evening, with illustrations that are the same old ones they have heard seven times before. Folks won't tolerate consistent strikeouts. As someone once said, "You don't have to hit a homerun every week, but you do have to hit consistent singles."

Preachers are required to live in the same world as their audience. One way of combating our over stimulated audience is ensuring that we are *teaching on great themes* – each and every week. It is no wonder that people are turned off with themes that are drawn from the daily newspaper or from a bumper sticker or from another Christian book, but great themes that would be of interest to most people can be drawn from the Bible. I believe that everyone is interested with the theme of scripture. They

are just as relevant to people today, as they were relevant to people back in the 16th century or back in the 1st century. Themes like:

- “Does my life matter?”
- “Where did I come from and where am I going?”
- “Where is God when I suffer?”
- “How can I live a better life than the one I am living?”
- “How can I break a life-controlling habit?”
- “How can I forgive and forget?”
- “How can I be a good person?”
- “Do religion and politics mix?”
- “What does it mean to be a human being?”
- “What is freedom?”
- “How can I experience personal fulfillment?”
- “How can I get rid of a guilty conscience?”
- “How do I satisfy my hunger for love?”
- “How do I satisfy my desire for sexual fulfillment? For marriage, family life, community?”
- “How do I deal with all of the destructive and dark things inside of me like jealousy, hate, lust, and revenge?”
- “Can I somehow master myself?”
- “Can I love my neighbor?”
- “Are there any answers that I can have for evil or suffering?”
- “How am I going to find the courage to deal with life and then with my own death?”
- “What is there that lies beyond death?”
- “Where is God when life is hard?”

If you could provide some light and answer to those kinds of questions, people will come out and listen to you and what you have to say. The problem is when we address issues, themes, and topics that make no connection with real people.

The Problem of a De-Sensitized Culture

The media presents us with a constant barrage of crises, disasters, wars, pictures of violence, and nude images. Only something of immense proportions, such as 9/11 or Columbine really registers in today’s desensitized mind of the public. The average audience has grown up receiving information in 20-30 second sound bytes.

Our Culture Prefers the Non-Verbal

Carefully reasoned arguments and carefully constructed presentations have less appeal than messages rich with images, pictures, and stories. People prefer to feel and experience rather than think. We live in a culture that turns everything into a form of entertainment. The evening news has become a form of info-tainment. A trial process, a capitol murder offense, open-heart surgery, internal discussions at the White House, church meetings, all private family times, highly dysfunctional families, and sexual relations – they’ve all been assumed under a broader category of entertainment.

Politicians simply cannot get elected unless they come across well on TV and present the right image – forceful, resolute, and compassionate.

What does this mean for preaching? David Larsen recommends that preaching needs to be more pictorial in place of lots of propositions. We have to use more images, more picture language in place of logically constructed arguments:

Long ago Aristotle maintained that the soul never thinks without pictures. People today are even more taken with images than ideas. We have too much argument – discourse stripped of its mystery – in our sermons and not enough drama. Violin music has been described as the scraping of horses' tails over cats' bowels. That definition has literal truthfulness, but it does scant justice to a violin concerto... W. MacNeille Dixon argued that "the mind of man is more like a picture gallery than a debating chamber."
(Larsen, 108-109)

The Importance of Right-Brained Preaching

How does this kind of preaching sound? What does it "sound like" to speak more pictorial? Here is an example of an introduction to a message I did recently during a series on Prayer:

I don't know how many of you are familiar with the name Terry Waite. Terry Waite was an Anglican church official and an advisor to Robert Runcie, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury. In that capacity, Terry Waite successfully negotiated for the release of British hostages in Iran in 1981 and Libya in 1985.

In 1987 while he was negotiating for the release of American hostages in Beirut taken by the Islamic terrorist group Hezbollah, Terry Waite himself was taken prisoner. He was held hostage in Lebanon for five years. Following his release, he continued his church work and he wrote his autobiography titled *Taken On Trust: An Autobiography*.

For five years, Terry Waite occupied a dark cell in Beirut. He writes: I was chained to a wall by my hands and feet. I was beaten on the soles of my feet with cable and denied all my human rights and contact with my family and given no access to the world. The hardest thing for a prisoner in those conditions is the uncertainty. You don't know what's going to happen to you next. You have no rights, no one to speak to, no one to advise you, no one to fall back on.

For four years I was kept in solitary confinement and had no companionship at all. I was always blindfolded, or had to wear a blindfold when someone came in the room. I never saw another human being. I never had any exercise in the whole period. I had to get what exercise I could while chained to the wall. I had five minutes a day to go to the bathroom; for the rest of the time I had to use a bottle. What was most difficult was that I had no contact with my family for five years. They didn't know whether I was alive or dead for about four years until the news got to them from another hostage.

One of the most wonderful things that happened was during the last six months of my captivity. I was given a small radio. I listened to BBC World Service continually. And a cousin of mine broadcast on my birthday my favorite piece of Bach's organ music, which he said was a gift from my family. It was a great source of hope and comfort to me to have some communication from home however small.

When Terry Waite was finally released, he was flown to an air force base in England. He said, I stumbled through a glass doorway and stared. My son, who was a teenager when I was captured, had now grown up so much that I didn't recognize him. Jillian, my youngest daughter ran to me, leaped into my arms and we both wept together. Then my whole family moved forward. We wept as we embraced each other. That's when I knew I was home.

I began a series on prayer last week. In these two introductory talks to my series, I want to attempt to change your mind about what prayer is because I think even followers of Christ are confused about prayer. We treat prayer as a test we failed or a spiritual standard that we haven't met. So many of us feel ashamed about the quality of our prayer life. Someone comes up to us and asks: "how are you doing in your devotions? What has God been saying to you recently in your prayers?" We hang out heads and say: "Well, I just haven't been doing very well in prayer." We failed to meet the standard. We failed the test.

Or we treat prayer as a burdensome obligation that we ought to perform, but we haven't. "I know I should pray; I know I ought to pray; but it is just one more obligation."

Worst of all of our misconceptions is prayer as a badge of holiness, a badge of pride. Prayer becomes a way that we prove to God or other people that we really are good Christians.

Last week I tried to give you a word picture of what prayer is. The word picture we used last week was of a man dying of thirst, who finally has the opportunity to drink. A man starving to death, who finally has the opportunity to eat. Prayer is not something we have to do; prayer is something we get to do. It is not an obligation it is a privilege. Prayer is water for the thirsty man, food for the hungry man.

Let me give you another word picture of what prayer is. Prayer is coming home from a far country to be with your father in heaven. Prayer is the recognition that we have been away from God. That we've been traveling in a far away country, or like Terry Waite, we have been held captive in a distant country, a country of bondage and addiction, a country of remorse and anger. We have been living in a country of fear and anxiety. We have been traveling for days or months, or

years in a country of our own lusts and other people's conditional love. In prayer we respond to the father's invitation to come home.

Prayer is hearing the father's invitation: "Son, daughter, stop keeping yourself away from me. Stop living in a distant country. Come home. Come home to my forgiveness. Come home to my affirmation. Come home to my acceptance. Come home to my unconditional love."

I've called today's talk, *Coming Home to God Our Father*. Luke 15:1-7; 11-24.

5: Preaching Christ to Postmoderns

Postmoderns are drowning in an ocean of choices and are looking for guidance. In the face of endless options and perspectives, people are frustrated by the complexity of life and have found that the rules they were taught as children no longer seem to apply. Every belief, every fact, every person seems to have another side to them or another angle to it. How do we speak the guiding truth of Christ to a world of shifting perspectives and endless options?

People are looking for authenticity in an age of sales pitches

It simply isn't sufficient to build the positive case for Christianity, the wonderful contribution that Christians have made to the world. One significant bridge building technique is to admit that there are valid objections to the way Christians have treated others in history. For example, I have spoken as a Jewish person to the way some Christian heroes have related to Jews. I've read passages from Martin Luther's "On the Jews and Their Lies." Luther recommends that Jewish synagogues be burned to the ground and that Jews be driven out of their homes and be forced to wander from village to village, friendless, and homeless. He recommended that Jewish books be burned in the public square, that their businesses be destroyed. Luther's viewpoints might have been the seed from which German Nazism and barbarism like Krystalnacht, the Night of Broken Glass happened.

I've talked about the Jewish experience and the Holocaust and having good Catholics in Poland and Lutherans in Germany join with the Nazis in berating and abusing Jews. I've talked about how few were the Christians who assisted Jews during WWII.

Now this discussion about the reality of the Christian life through the centuries can take us in several directions. One direction might be to talk about the grace of God that offers hope and forgiveness even to cowards and abusers and the self-righteous – people like us. A second direction that an authentic discussion of Christian history might take us is towards the redefinition of the word "Christian" and "Christianity." You offering a fresh definition of the word "Christian" would, simply help most of the postmodern audiences that we speak to. And here you could talk about Christian and Christianity as not being synonymous with certain political perspectives. That to be a Christian doesn't mean that you are necessarily a conservative Republican.

People are looking for inclusiveness and welcome

Postmoderns have a longing for inclusiveness. Is the gospel of Jesus Christ simply narrow and exclusive, "Come join us as we brow beat the rest of the culture?" If you wanted to do a series on welcome, on God changing someone's heart from being narrow, nationalistic, racist and exclusive, you couldn't do a better job than preaching through the book of Jonah. We can identify with Jonah. We all desire for God to get our enemies. We all want God to bless us and crush those we hate. To Jonah's horror, he learned that God not only is willing to bless Israel, but he blesses Israel's enemies.

The same lessons could be drawn from the book of Ruth, from the Abrahamic covenant, the parable of the great banquet.

People are looking for truth in an age of relativism

There is the great challenge as well in proclaiming truth in an age of relativism. There are lots of ways to attack the issue of truth other than to simply overwhelm the hearer with an accumulative case based on evidence. That is one approach. Here we could talk about the mystery of faith. C.S. Lewis has a wonderful illustration of how reality goes beyond our capacities to apprehend things without denying the reality of the thing itself. Lewis writes:

“What they do when they want to explain the atom or something of that sort, is to give a description of which you can make a mental picture. But then they warn you that this picture is not what the scientists actually believe. What the scientists believe is a mathematical formula. The pictures are only there to help you understand the formula. But they are not really true in the way the formula is. They don’t give you the real thing, but something more or less like it. They are meant to help. If they do not help, you can drop them. The thing itself can not be pictured, it can only be expressed mathematically.” Lewis goes on to say, “We are in the same boat here. We believe that the death of Christ is just that point in history at which something absolute unimaginable from the outside shows through into our own world. And if we cannot picture even the atoms of which our world is built, of course we aren’t going to be able to picture this. Indeed, if we found that we could fully understand it, that very fact would show that it is not what it professes to be, the inconceivable, the uncreated, and the thing from beyond nature striking down into nature like a bolt of lightening. Let me ask, ‘What good will it be to us if we don’t understand it?’ But that is easily answered. Man can eat his dinner without understanding how food nourishes him. A man can accept what Christ has done without knowing how it works. Indeed, he certainly would not know how it works until he has accepted it. We are told that Christ was killed for us, that his death has washed out our sins, and that by dying he disabled death itself. That’s the formula. That is Christianity. This is what has to be believed. Any theories we build up regarding how Christ’s death did this are, in my view, quite secondary, mere plans, or diagrams, or pictures to be left alone if they don’t help us. And if they do not help us, not to be confused with the thing itself, all the same some of these theories are worth looking at. We can help people. We can say, ‘Here’s the essential thing and these are all the models built around it.’”

People are looking for the elimination of unnecessary dogmatism

In an age of pluralism and relativism, we must eliminate unnecessary dogmatism. There is a wonderful story I heard about an old man who lived in Kentucky. He was a farmer and he came from a very rigid, legalistic, Pentecostal background. This farmer’s little blond-haired, 3 or 4-year-old daughter was walking with the man and whenever something contrary to the old man’s way of thinking came up in the conversation, he made a point of saying so that the little girl could hear it, “We don’t believe in that, do

we?” And so if the subject of dancing came up, he looked at the little girl and he said, “We don’t believe in dancing, do we?” If the subject of women working outside the home came up, he’d say, “We don’t believe in that, do we?” The subject of smoking, working on Sunday, mixing of races, “We don’t believe in that, do we?”

As the little girl and her grandfather approached the farm pond, they discovered that one of the ducks had hatched her eggs and was now surrounded by a dozen little scurrying balls of yellow fluff. The little girl ran to the duck and these little ducklings and squatted own in their midst for a few moments. She was absolutely entranced by the ducks. Then suddenly, she remembered her grandfather and she looked up at him and said, “Granddaddy, do we beweeve in ducks?”

There are various issues where committed, evangelical Christians differ regarding their positions. Historically, the church has been far from gracious and has had the tendency of labeling contrary views as un-biblical and questioning the faith of genuine believers. One of the things preachers can do in their sermons to gain great credibility is to preach on the topics where you have the whole church as your hero, rather than simply focusing on your brand of the Christian faith.

People are looking for answers that work

How do we deal with the loss of truth in an age of relativism? Not only can we eliminate excessive dogmatism, allow for discussion around models, but we can move the issue of truth from the abstract, from the philosophical, to the practical and behavioral. Don’t simply argue *abstract beliefs*. Call people to do Christianity.

Blaise Pascal, the French scientist and mathematician and philosopher, was working at his laboratory shortly after his beloved daughter died. A friend dropped by and was amazed by how peaceful Pascal was in the face of the tragedy that he had suffered. The friend said, “I wish I had your beliefs. Then I could live your life.” Pascal countered, “Start living my life, and then you will soon have my beliefs.”

You can pull out what Jesus said in John 7:17, “If anyone chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I am speaking on my own.”

The Christian faith is something that you do. It is not simply something that you believe. If you have people actually read the New Testament, they will come to one of five conclusions regarding their life and their faith in Jesus:

- 1 – They don’t do it;
- 2 – They can’t do it;
- 3 – They don’t want to do it;
- 4 – They are evil;
- 5 – They love to deceive in moral issues and suppress the truth regarding Jesus.

You can challenge your audience. You can say, “If you doubt whether Jesus is who he claims to be, *start putting his words into practice* even while you doubt.” Of course, what will happen to the individual who attempts to put into practice what Jesus taught him is a recognition of their utter inability, an awakening of their sense of need, a desperation for some outside help and completion. People don’t always move from intellectual conversion to behavioral conversion. Very often the process works in the reverse. We start with behavior.

People are looking for life change

Many people recognize that they are leading a rotten life. They see their lives as broken down, full of cynicism, full of lust. They wonder if they will be this way forever. The typical view of sin in our culture is people who really, really want to go out and offend God. Most people though do not see themselves as *addicts* or people who intentionally want to offend God. They do see themselves often as stuck and unable to get beyond some habit or relational problem. Most people when they hear the word *addict*, think only of some “heroin addict” and make no connection with their own lives. But we are constantly speaking to people who are genuinely looking for a way to change their life – be it relationally, some habit, job difficulties, marriage struggles, parenting relationships, etc...

People are looking for new stories

What I find particularly helpful about postmodernism is its emphasis upon *story*, upon what postmodernists call meta-narrative – the big explanatory story of life. This is so enormously useful for Christians to comprehend and it is huge for pastors. For example, let’s say you are doing counseling or you are thinking about having a recovery group for women in the church who struggle with eating disorders, with anorexia or bulimia. Now, you can approach the counseling problem by discussing the issues of control and body image and family dynamics; you could do several sessions on self-image and substance addiction. Some of this might be helpful. But postmodernism gives us the insight that whenever you sit down to counsel someone you are telling a story. You can tell the cognitive-behavior story to the person who is struggling, you can tell the family systems story to the bulimic, you could tell any one of the competing humanistic stories to interpret for this woman why she does what she does or you can fit her behavior into the grand Christian story of sin, forgiveness, redemption and grace.

The Romans 1 story is a story of how we all have spiraled down to a desperate place where we all need God. Verse 21 explains that it begins with my *ingratitude*. Each of our stories includes our inability to live in a place of thankfulness and delight in who God is. Verse 21-22 highlights our *ignorance*, showing that each of us in claiming to be wise, we have actually become foolish. Verse 23 then shows us that we have turned to some form of *idolatry* and have created gods that we have come to worship above and beyond God. Verse 24 concludes with each of us being in a place of *impurity* and in a place where we are under God’s judgment. God gives us over to our own way. His judgment is simply letting us have our own way.

Now, many Christian pastors, and I would venture to say the majority of Christian counselors, don't understand that every counseling session is the telling of a story. Often we tell misleading stories, untrue stories that provide a false interpretative grid. "Well given the hyper-control of your family, eating was the one area you could control." By telling a story that way, how have we helped the person to reorient their lives around the biblical compass of the fallen tendency to turn everything in creation into an idol; to explore with an individual the nature of idolatry – what an idol is, how we offer false worship, how can our idolatry be repented of. You can't repent of family of origin issues or controlling parents.

I think in our preaching, we have to get used to telling the big story over and over; not just a verse here or there. Help people hear the biblical story and how it relates to the questions that people are actually asking: *Do you know why we are having these corporate scandals? Do you know why there is so much corruption? Do you know why we see marriages falling apart? Do you know why we see Hollywood stars take their lives? Do you know why we constantly compare ourselves with others?* Tell the biblical story! The story of creation and the fall. The story of sin and redemption, of forgiveness and grace.

Here is an excerpt from a message I did, titled – *How to View Your Job*:

Creation, the Fall, Redemption is the tri-focal lens through which we look at work. I want you to see this in Genesis 2. We find man in the Garden of Eden, man in paradise. And in Genesis 2:15, we read this, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." What we discover is that work is not the result of the Fall, that man in paradise wasn't living in a state of glorious inactivity. Paradise was not a perpetual vacation. Work was created before the Fall.

What a different perspective on work.

Studs Terkel, the Chicago columnist, wrote a book some years ago called "Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do." Listen to the opening paragraph of Studs Terkel's introduction. Here's what he writes:

This book being about work is, by its very nature, about violence—to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as accidents...about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all (or beneath all) about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the working wounded among the great many of us.

Work was created by God. Is that the way the average person thinks about work? That basically he spends his day amusing himself by ticking off his supervisor and making fun of co-workers who are trying to do a good job. He said, "Just for laughs, I dumped a bunch of ketchup packets on the ground

through the drive-thru so that I watched car tires roll over them and spray ketchup on the car. Then as the drivers go by, I flick pennies at their cars. I love getting their orders wrong because they can't do anything about it. Sometimes I take some of the old buns and flip them around like frozen Frisbees. Then at the end of the day, I like to slide across the freshly mopped floor. About the only way to get back at me, [he said] if you really want to tick a McDonald's worker off, just take some ketchup and spread it over one of the trays and pour some salt in it. That really upsets McDonald's workers."

Do you think that guy goes to work every day saying, "Work has been created by God?"

And because work was created by God, being a worker is part of our created design. Just think, God himself is a worker. Jesus says in John 5:17, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." Part of our imaging of God is to work. And that is why unemployment, or underemployment is so painful. There is something fundamental to our created design as human beings that we get the opportunity to work.

I remember after I was fired from my first job as an attorney. I worked at a law firm here in town for just a couple of months. I was fresh out of law school and I got fired. The story is too long to go into, but one of its major components is that I did not wish to read through Hustler and Penthouse magazines to prepare for a liable case in which the law firm was representing none other than Larry Flynt. It wasn't a great job for a young Christian attorney.

But when I couldn't find any other work, I became so depressed that I tore our entire bathroom out right down to the floor joists and the ceiling rafters and wall beams. I mean, I took it all out – all the old plaster and lap. I carried it out of the house. I put up new dry wall, new ceramic tile, a new sink, new cabinets – everything.

Anybody who knows me and knows how much I don't like to do work on the house would say, "Rich, you must have been really depressed."

But I couldn't just sit around. We are, by design, made to work.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, back in the early 90's, a former member of the Politburo in Moscow said that the Soviet system for seventy years destroyed people's spirituality. That's the word he used. He was a communist. He said the Soviet system for seventy years destroyed people's spirituality by robbing them of the incentive to work. Any system, any do-gooder plan that robs people of the incentive to work destroys their created image. You were made to work.

And do you know that work is such a fundamental part of this universe that you don't get done working even in the new heavens and the new earth? I don't

know what your view of eternity is. For many people, it is an endless choir where all we do is sing all day. And for those of us who don't have particularly good voices, if singing was all we did in heaven, we could turn it into hell.

Isaiah 65 talks about the new heavens and the new earth. Rather than glorious inactivity, perpetual vacation, Isaiah says that the new heavens and the new earth involve building houses. "They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. They will not toil in vain..."

There is going to be work to do. See, because we are by design workers, Christians do not experience the week as TGIF – Thank God it's Friday. Because we were created to work, the Christian view of work is TGIM – Thank God it's Monday. Is that your view of work?

Part of the reason why we don't say "Thank God it's Monday" is because we find ourselves so separated from God very often in our work. As a result of Greek influence in the early church, there grew to be this dualism between sacred work on the one hand and secular work on the other. There was in the Middle Ages in the church a hierarchy that many evangelicals, many from our church tradition, really still have.

The highest level of work is martyr, or missionary. Those are the absolute heroes. And then you come down to a second tier and that's the full-time Christian worker – the pastor, the evangelist, and the Christian youth worker. And then the lowest tier is everyone else – the car salesman, the attorney, the teacher, the IT group leader, and the personnel manager. Everyone else is in the third tier.

Dorothy Sayres, who is a writer and professor in England, a dear friend of C. S. Lewis, once gave a lecture in 1942 titled, "Why Work," in which she said the following: "In nothing has the church so lost its hold on reality as in her failure to understand or respect the secular vocation. She has allowed work and religion to become separate departments and is astonished to find as a result the secular work of the world has turned to purely selfish and destructive ends and that the greater part of the world's intelligent workers have become irreligious, or at least, uninterested in religion. But is it astonishing? How can anyone remain interested in religion, which seems to have no concern with nine-tenths of a life?"

Do you know that there is no sharp line of demarcation between work on the one hand and worship on the other? In fact, if you look at Genesis 2:15 where it says, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to take care of it," the word for "work" is the common Hebrew word for worship – avodah. And the word for "taking care" is the common Hebrew word

for obey – somrah. To work and to take care of the Garden blurred in the Hebrew mind with to worship and to obey God. See, in the Hebrew mind the worker was functioning in his particular realm of life as a priest. The service that a priest rendered in the temple to God was called avodah. The work that a farmer rendered was called the same thing – avodah.

Do you know that the same thing is true in the New Testament in Greek? The word for “work” – latreia, is the same word that the New Testament writers used for “worship.” Work for the biblical Christian becomes a way for us to worship God. It’s not that we have worship on the one hand and work on the other, nor that we turn work into the object of our worship, by way of the idolatry of careerism, where we try to find all of our meaning and value through our work. Work for the biblical Christian is a vehicle for worship. I do this work under the lordship of Christ unto the Lord and all day long in my work, I’m looking around for God. To work and to take care of my little corner of the world is my act of worship and obedience to God.

Do you get it? You don’t get it.

Let me take this in a slightly different direction. What is your view of paradise? When you hear the word “paradise,” what comes into your minds? White sand beaches? A royal blue sea? You floating on a raft in the sun having a little bell to ring so that you call some cabana boy on the beach, who wades out into the sea with your drink and turns you over so that you don’t get too bad of a sunburn?

What’s your view of paradise? If your view of paradise is just glorious inactivity and doesn’t include work, you are not thinking like a biblical Christian. Listen. Here’s precisely the problem with many Christian retirees. It is not “Thank God it’s Friday,” it’s “Thank God I’m sixty to sixty five years old and now I get to spend the rest of my life in glorious inactivity.” Where is retirement in the Bible? I mean, praise God for that season in life where you don’t have to work forty to fifty hours a week just to put food on the table. But retirement? Inactivity? A biblical Christian says, “forget that!”

Where in the Bible do you see people retired? Moses? He was 120 and still going strong for the Lord. Joseph was 110.

One of my all-time Christian heroes is a man named Charles Simeon. I have silhouettes of Charles Simeon preaching hanging in my office. Simeon preached at a church attached to Cambridge University in England from the 1780’s – 1830’s. He was the spiritual advisor behind that group of English Christians who ended the slave trade. Simeon was the pastor of some of the guys in Parliament, like William Wilberforce, and he spiritually guided the movement that ended slavery in the British Empire. I love Charles Simeon and I look forward to spending time with him in the Kingdom of God.

When Charles Simeon was forty-seven years old, his health broke and he became weak and had health problems which lasted for thirteen years, until he was sixty. One day, on a visit to Scotland as he crossed over the border into Scotland, the sickness lifted. There was this miraculous intervention of God. He felt suddenly better like the woman who touched the hem of Jesus' garment.

In any case, Simeon felt the Lord speaking to him and the Lord said to him, "You have been promising yourself an active life up until age sixty and then a Sabbath evening [what we would call retirement]. So I laid you aside because you entertained the notion of resting from all of your labor. Now you've arrived at that period of time where you thought you were going to rest, but instead I have determined in this last hour of your life to double, triple, and quadruple your strength."

Simeon went on to pastor very effectively for another twenty years.

Retirement? Raymond Lull spent the last years of his life from age seventy nine on learning Arabic and was eventually martyred in North Africa when he stood in a crowd at a marketplace and preached Jesus boldly among the Muslims.

Retirement? I love Pastor John Piper's line. He says, "Senior Citizen Discounts are not for the purpose of vacation, they are for the purpose of you doing short-term missions."

We were created to work, whether you draw a paycheck or not. Older folks, you were created to be workers.

Parents, you are doing damage to your child's spiritual health, if childhood is just a period of glorious inactivity. If the only thing your child has picked up in your home is how to be served, how to have mom clean his room, and do his laundry, and do his homework projects, you are denying the created image of God in your child. Your child has been created to be a worker. Give him something to do.

Well, if work was a part of paradise, if we were created to work, if we are called to work, then why is work so miserable for many of us? Why is our experience of work so unhappy?

Again, from Studs Terkel's book, listen to some of these quotes:

"I'm a machine," says the spot welder.

"I'm caged," says the bank teller.

"I'm a mule," says the steel worker.

"A monkey can do what I do," says the receptionist.

"I'm less than a farm implement," says the migrant worker.

"I'm an object," says the fashion model.

Blue collars and white collars use the same phrase, "I'm a robot."

“There’s nothing to talk about,” the young accountant despairs.

Why is our experience of work so far from paradise? Because here’s the second lens through which you need to work – the lens of the Fall. When our first parents sinned against God by deliberately disobeying his commandment in the Garden, when our first parents rejected God’s Word and aligned themselves instead with God’s enemy, the serpent, God cursed them and through them, he cursed us.

One of the most prominent areas where we experience the curse in is in our work. Look at Genesis 3:17 with me. *To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’ Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.”*

Here are three curses. First of all, there is the curse on the work place: Cursed is the ground because of you.” The ground is the environment that we work in.

Then I played a Video Clip from the movie *Office Space* which portrays a very negative attitude about work.

There are a number of reasons why preaching has no contemporary respect. Many people have seen it as a boring lecture that they have to endure week in and week out. Much of this comes from the confusion of preachers regarding their task. We need to be clear on what the task of the preacher is. We need to constantly help people see how their lives and what we are teaching fits into the big biblical story of Creation, Fall, and Redemption.

6: Preaching to Contemporary Audiences: Bridge Building

There are a number of ways to deal with the challenges and barriers in preaching. Obviously, it has to do with our confidence in the nature of Bible inspiration, but I think that there are ways we can at least undercut some of the hostility to authoritative preaching by:

Eliminating all “you” statements and replace them with “we” statements

By that I mean instead of saying that everything must be done by the listener, we include ourselves with the listener. This softens the blow and makes what we are saying more acceptable for people to hear because it doesn't sound like we are standing over them condescendingly, but rather that we are coming alongside of them and struggling through the same things that they are.

Continually telling our listeners that we are not claiming any authority for ourselves

The reason we have authority is because *the authority resides in God and in God's Word*. If that is very clear, then it is not our judgment that's being held up as the only right judgment, but we're simply telling people that we are announcing what the Bible says. Billy Graham does this all the time. He continually says, “The Bible says...the Bible says...” and that makes things more acceptable than us standing up there like some dictator.

Demonstrating the relevance of the message

Another way to deal with the revolt against authority and people's cynicism is to show the relevance of the message. It's much easier to help someone to accept authority when they see that authority somehow relates to their lives and will actually help their real life. For example, if the message against adultery can be shown to actually help marriages and make people more secure and build up families, then they are more likely to accept it as simply a pronouncement from on high.

Several years ago I did a series on *Breaking Life Controlling Habits*. Basically I talked about how to get free from addictive behaviors. I gave an illustration of one of the core beliefs that keep people stuck. That is the belief that if they give this habit up, they will have nothing. If they give up the sexually addictive habit, they will be empty, cold, and lifeless. Life will have no excitement, no zip. If they give up cocaine they will lose the feeling of power. People will lose that sense of control because truly there is a thrill in different kinds of addictions. Every person who is stuck has felt that thrill. So what I said was that far from being grim, breaking an addictive cycle *actually opens us up to a new way of life* that is far more satisfying, far more gratifying, than anything we knew in the past.

Reminding Listeners Non-Discipleship is a Choice, Just Like Discipleship

In this series, *Breaking Life Controlling Habits*, I challenged people to put together a cost and benefit sheet regarding their particular addictions and habits. On the one side I asked them to list all the benefits, all the pros. I had them list everything they get from this particular habit – the excitement, the tension release, the sympathy, and whatever positives came from this habit. But on the negative side, on the cost side, I had them list what it is doing to their relationship with God, to their home life, to their family life, to their credit, to their finances, to their consciences. What they will find is that the costs always outweigh the benefits. So it is not a grim, destructive thing to give up a habit. Now that kind of message, about the costs of non-discipleship is something that people can understand and buy into. *We don't only have to preach the costs of discipleship. We can preach the cost of non-discipleship and show how the life of discipleship is actually a freeing thing.*

Talking about what the “experts” teach

I refer to experts often because we need to understand that the authority of the Bible is not assumed, even by conservative evangelicals. One of your jobs as preachers is to regularly build up the authority of the scriptures in your hearers' minds. Scripture is now seen as one viewpoint, important but possibly outdated. People do not assume, even in conservative evangelical churches, that the Bible has real authority. They do trust, at least to some degree, what the experts or therapists are saying. Or what scientists say today. Or what the medical establishment says. Discuss what the experts say. Demonstrate from history the incredible destructive effects of unforgiveness – like the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 (Muslim victory over Serbs) that still drives genocidal violence today. Or how the Irish still talk about the 17th century conquest of William of Orange. Or the Arab-Israeli conflict that continues without any end in sight. These are all large scale historical examples of the destructive power of unforgiveness.

So what I will often do is show how the experts have come up with a view and then I suggest that that view is consistent with what the Bible is teaching. Let me give you an illustration. Again, in my series on *Breaking Life Controlling Habits* I used the passage in Colossians 3, “Put to death what is earthly in you.” I said that here Paul is saying that the first step in getting free of a life controlling habit is to abstain, radically abstain from the controlling thing. Before you can even deal with the root issues, you need to abstain, stop it, cut it off. I said the therapists that were working in the recovery movement would have said that is unrealistic counsel to give to an addict. They said that addicts, by the very nature of their addiction, could not simply abstain. If they could abstain, they would abstain! And so it makes no sense to look at an alcoholic and say, “Stop it now!” What you need to do is deal with the root issues that created the addiction and that will gradually end the addiction. I said, “You know, a funny thing has happened in the last five years of the recovery movement. Now people in the recovery movement are saying,

“We can't begin to get to the root issues in a person's life until they abstain from their primary addiction. In other words, until the addict, the alcoholic, stops drinking, we can't begin to deal with the underlying issues of guilt, or a trauma, or inner pain from the past because the alcohol is creating its own set of problems.

To deal with this right now, people are saying you have to abstain. The experts are coming over to where the Bible has always been.”

That is just the way I put it. The therapists are coming over to where the Bible has always been. In that way, I am communicating to my audience that the Bible has authority and the best medical evidence is under-girding that authority. We have to constantly hold up and teach people the authority of the scriptures because it is not assumed in today's audience. Sometimes humor and indirect communication are more effective.

Know what you are talking about

There is nothing more destructive to your credibility and the authority of your message than getting your facts wrong. If you can't pronounce "cardiovascular," don't use it. If you haven't briefed yourself on the current situation in North Korea, don't mention it. Never misstate medical facts or historical facts or computer terms. If you try to speak about some technical topic and mess it up, people that know about it will just write you off as an idiot and not even hear the stuff that you do know about. It is just incredibly counterproductive to talk about things that you don't know, so read up beforehand! You should always assume that someone in your audience is working in whatever field of knowledge that you're talking about and that they know all about it...so be accurate!

7: The Case for Expository Preaching

What expository preaching is not

A lot of people when they hear the phrase “expository preaching” think back to the 1940’s kind of irrelevant, dry shredded wheat, verse-by-verse preaching that has no application and puts everyone to sleep. This form of preaching has been so misused and abused that first we should take some time to clear the ground about what expository preaching is not.

Expository preaching is not verse by verse, phrase by phrase, running commentaries on the text.

For example: *“The name Paul comes from the Greek Word ‘paulos’ which means small. I knew a man named Paul Little, which interestingly means that his name was ‘Little Little.’ He had a son that they used to call ‘small Paul,’ so I supposed his name was ‘little Little Little.’ Isn’t that fascinating? Let’s move on.”*

“The word apostle comes from the Greek word ‘apostelo,’ which means to be sent. It really derives from the Old Testament concept of ‘shaliach,’ who was an authorized messenger. Let’s move on.”

That is not expository preaching!

Expository preaching is not simply unapplied truth

Preaching is not a tedious discussion of the world of Thessalonica or the history of the Jebusites. As one liberal pastor put it nearly a century ago – “Surprising as it may seem, people do not come to church asking, ‘Whatever happened to the Jebusites or the Perizzites?’” Expository preaching does not require you to simply do book-by-book studies. One of the habits that preachers must regularly do is write in the margins of their manuscript, “So What?” Why are you telling *these* people what you are telling them?

Expository preaching is not an essay

First of all, I don’t think that a message we present from the pulpit is an essay. An essay is written to be read. *A sermon is primarily meant to be spoken.* Essays are elegant, presented with literary style; sermons should be simple and *should contain an element of attack.* An essay, by nature, is generally not slashing or attacking, it doesn’t have the kind of vigor of a preached sermon. In your message *you are building a case* regarding the issue or topic that you are preaching on in that specific sermon.

A few years ago I received a free subscription of a journal called “The Clergy Journal.” If any of you subscribe to this journal, I’d ask you the question, “why?” But, in any case, I was flipping through “The Clergy Journal” and they have “award winning” sermons in this journal. Sermons that the editors of this journal judged to be the best by whatever criteria they used to measure the best. As I read these sermons, I could not imagine that these things were ever spoken to a real live audience. I went down the hall to our

associate pastor and I said, “let me read to you an opening that I am thinking of using this week in church for this Sunday’s message.” The sermon began something like this: “It was said of Euripides as he gazed out on the blue Aegean...” Who in the world would think of speaking this way? No wonder the churches in America are empty!

Expository preaching is not a lecture

A lecture is primarily aimed at the mind of an individual. But *a sermon is aimed at the whole person*, not just the mind for the purpose of conveying information. In the main, our teaching should go to the heart and will of an individual. At the end of a successful teaching, we ought to have a person making some kind of decision or some sort of life change, even a very minor one, concerning what we have taught. I don’t believe we bypass the mind for a totally emotional or guilt-induced decision. *We want the whole person to be gripped*. In fact, if our message does not somehow lay hold of the heart and will of an individual, then we are simply wasting our listeners’ time. Again, what we are not trying to do in teaching is merely give information. We’re aiming at some kind of behavioral change, some new insights into the person of God and it is the will and heart of the listener that should be primarily in line. What do you want *people to do* as a result of your message?

What Expository Preaching Is

Very simply, expository preaching means that *the passage governs the main points and the sub-points of the sermon*. Rather than the main points and the sub-points being derived from the preacher’s mind, or from fifteen different biblical verses strung together to make a predetermined point, or even worse from a book that a preacher has recently read, the expositor derives the substance of his or her message and the points of the message from a passage or verse (or several verses) read in context.

Expository preaching is building structure from the text:

I believe we can compare teaching and preaching to the construction of a building. If we think about a building, it has a certain amount of substance so *every message* or teaching we prepare should have a certain amount of substance. A building has a skeleton and so we’ll find the same thing is true with respect to a teaching—there is a skeleton or an outline that we can follow. If there is no skeleton or outline then the building will fall to the ground. It is the same thing with a teaching. A teaching without a skeleton, without a structure or an outline is simply going to fall to the ground.

Like any building, a teaching requires windows. When I think of a building without windows, I think of a place that is dark and cold. I would compare that to a teaching, which has no illustrations. In other words, *illustrations are used to shed light on the subject that we’re considering*. Without illustrations, we’re going to find that teachings are dead, cold, and lifeless. The construction of a building is a good metaphor for teaching.

Expository preaching is bridge building:

A second metaphor for a teaching or sermon is *bridge building*. For this I am indebted to John Stott. The metaphor of bridge building is very useful. If you think about a bridge, you think about a structure that is *anchored on two sides*. There are pillars that would be anchored on both sides of a river.

It's the same thing with preaching. A good message should be anchored on one end in the world of the Bible. In other words, it is very important that we start off finding out what the passage means before we apply it. And when we ask what does the passage mean, the answer must be, the passage means what it meant to the writer of the passage and the readers of the passage. We don't address, first of all, what the passage means by what it means to us today. We begin by asking what did the passage mean to the writer. And that involves the tools of grammatical study and understanding of the context of the passage, understanding the cultural background, and understanding of the words that are used, and understanding of the literary form of the passage (is it poetry, is it prose, is it a proverb, is it a parable, is it an allegory, etc.). So on one end of the bridge, we're to understand the world of the Bible and what the passage meant to the original author.

On the other side of the bridge, we're trying to relate that message to the world of today. What is the passage's meaning for today? Most of the objections to expository teaching or preaching are that one end of the bridge is neglected and therefore the teaching is too impractical. People go into great depth sowing the original Greek and what the meaning of the text was in the mind of Paul and we learn all about the history of Thessalonica and its founding and its water supply, and then the teaching ends. It is as if people are taken over one side of the bridge and led up to the middle of the river and then dropped off.

On the other hand, some people never really consider the meaning of the text at all. And almost from the firing of the gun, we're presented with a series of exhortations. A person tells us what we need to do and there's a string of exhortations: You need to do this; you need to do that; you need to do the other thing. *We're really never told why we need to do this or that*, or what was in the mind of Paul. And so *the series of exhortations is not rooted* in the biblical text. We must root all of our exhortations in the biblical text. A constant string of exhortations simply exhausts people. It is like being attacked with a machine gun of "you must do this..." statements. Both sides of the bridge need to be built.

Expository preaching is like serving a meal

A third illustration that I would use is the serving of a meal. When I think of being served a meal, I think of having the meal attractively prepared. It's not only the substance of the food, that is the fact that the food is nutritious for me, that makes me want to eat that food. But in addition, I'm concerned about the delivery of the food. An egg or a meal of Chinese food would be equally nutritious if it was thrown against a window and I had to scrape it off. But I'd much rather eat the egg or the Chinese food if it's prepared on a nice plate and served up hot with a flower on the table.

So one of the things I think we need to do when we think about presenting a teaching or preaching is think about our delivery. It's said that Augustine said there are three things to concern yourself with when preparing a teaching: delivery, delivery, and delivery. Serve it hot. Serve it fresh. Serve it attractively. Are you comfortable as you deliver your message, or are you tense and nervous? Do you vary your pace of speech; the pitch of your voice; and the volume you speak in? Do you make good eye contact with your audience? Every time you break eye contact with your audience, there is a loss of connection. Reading long quotes or reading your message creates too much distance and gives the message a feeling of artificiality. One thing that will help you grow in this is to have someone videotape you giving a message and then watching it. The art of delivery demands hard work for the preacher, but it is worth all the effort you put into it.

Expository preaching is screwing in God's Word

Charles Simeon spoke of screwing the word of truth into the hearers. To screw something into something else takes powerful force. As the screwdriver turns round and round, it forces the screw in deeper and it gains such a hold that is impossible to withdraw by force. With each point you are screwing the truth in to a person's mind and heart. This is why it is vital that we have one "big idea," one "dominant thought," throughout each message. We do not want to preach four messages in each message. We want to have one message and to have all of the sub-points support that message. We do not simply want to offer people a bunch of random pearls. They may be great points, great advice, great insights, and great wisdom. But if they do not fit with the "big idea" of the message, then we must cut them out. We want to offer people a "necklace of pearls," where each idea, each point, fits onto one strand of thought.

The value of expository preaching

One of the main values of expository preaching is that *it models for the congregation* the way the Word of God is to be handled. Rather than wrenching verses out of context so that you have to skip and jump around the Bible finding a verse here and a verse there and squeezing it into your preordained outline and process, you allow the Bible to speak to the congregation about a particular subject.

Now, expository sermons can be topical. In other words, if a person were to do a series on marriage, she might spend a week or two in Genesis 2, and then maybe the following week preach from Proverbs 31. The preacher might then move on to Psalm 45; then the following week teach from the Song of Songs, or Malachi 2, or Ephesians 5, etc.

What a person would not do, if they were to preach expositorily, is simply extract out verses wrenched out of context in order to make a predetermined point. It is not expository preaching to pull out a verse from the book of James, "Be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger," and say, "This is so important in communication in marriage" when the context for the statement has nothing to do with marriage, but with handling trials and how we receive the word of God in a time of trial.

Not only do we assist our hearers regarding how they ought to handle God's Word for themselves, but the essential question of expository preaching is: *do you as a preacher attempt to bend your thoughts to the scriptures, or do you use the scriptures to support your thoughts*. Where is the ultimate authority for your preaching? As Haddon Robinson points out, this is a very different question than the question of whether your preaching is orthodox or evangelistic. You can preach an evangelistic sermon and wrench verses completely out of context. You can preach an orthodox sermon and badly mishandle the text. But you won't preach a sermon in which your thoughts are submitted to the authority of scripture unless you let the Bible speak for itself.

Again, unless your text is one single verse, expository preaching is generally not a word-for-word study. What you are looking for in expository preaching is *the big thought*, the message, of this particular text. *What is this author attempting to communicate?* The Bible writer is not attempting to offer us 175 sermonettes. There is a message. The message of James 1 is about trials. The message of James 2 is about discrimination. The message of James 3 is about our speech. When we preach, we ought to *capture the big message* of the text.

Another value of expository preaching is that we preach on subjects that we *normally would not consider*. Our congregations get to hear the whole counsel of God. Thus, for example, I recently did a series on the Song of Songs. Now, you can't preach the Song of Songs without speaking about the issue of feminine beauty. In 20 years of preaching, I have never had an extended section of a message about feminine beauty or body image, or how the culture shapes women's self-concept, or how a woman might become more confident in the area of her looks and beauty. And yet, the Song of Songs speaks to these very contemporary and relevant issues. Several hundred women responded to ministry. Dozens of women came forward and were absolutely broken before the Lord as the Lord ministered to women deeply. That message that I titled "On Love and Beauty" has sold hundreds and hundreds of copies here at the church. I've been told that this message circulated around the country. But I never would have preached on the subject had I not been going through a series from the book. Expository preaching applies the biblical message to the hearer. The text is related to the concerns, the questions, the fears, the doubts, the sin, the anxiety, and the pressures, facing our hearers. It is not expository preaching unless the meaning of the scripture is applied to the listener. Until the question "so what?" is answered, you have not preached an expository message.

The message must be derived from the scripture, its essential points and sub-points, and the message must be applied. If you listen to a preacher droning on and on about the Perizzites or the Amaleikites and the preacher does not tell you why this group of people makes a difference in your life, he is not preaching expositively. *How does God's Word relate to the current situation that the people in your congregations find themselves in?*

Now, this is not the only kind of sermon that can be preached. One can preach topically, in which you gather up what the Bible teaches about a certain subject such as

divorce, healing, gossip. But in my mind, even here, you try as much as you can, to submit your thoughts and concepts to what the Bible is actually saying. The topical sermon is particularly used when you are teaching a message that contains a list, such as the Fruit of the Spirit, or the Ten Commandments. It is inevitable when you are teaching through a list that you employ other scriptures to inform the meaning of that list.

8: Personal and Other Barriers in Preaching

One of the great challenges facing the church in the 21st century is a *loss of confidence by preachers* and their authority not only in the task of preaching, but also in the content of what is said. There is a great cartoon that portrays a pastor sitting behind a large wooden desk being consoled by a compassionate church member. The pastor is obviously disappointed and discouraged. There is a worship attendance chart right behind the desk that has apparently provoked the pastor's anxiety and upset. The chart shows a steep decline in worship and attendance for the past two years. As you look at the descending line, pretty soon it looks like it is going to have to go beyond the boundaries of the chart. The church member says in very compassionate pastoral tones to the pastor, "Pastor, I'm no expert, but perhaps you shouldn't close each sermon with the phrase, 'But then, again, what do I know?'"

One of the things that have happened to pastors as they've preached to congregations who have no appetite for dogmatic assertions is that pastors have become almost ambivalent and apologetic in their proclamations. Pastors are editing out consciously and unconsciously words and concepts that they instinctively know will not be accepted by the congregation; words like judgment, hell, evil, immoral. Clear lines in preaching are replaced by dotted lines. The *atmosphere of doubt* that we pick up from the larger culture has invaded the pulpit.

A couple of years ago I was invited by Leadership Network to participate in a conference on "Church Within a Church." Since we've been hosting Joshua House, our young adult service here for the past 8 years or so, we've had a lot of experience in dealing with a congregation within a church. While we were there at the Leadership Network conference, we had the opportunity to hear one of the main presenters who is considered to be a very prominent evangelical working with younger adults and Gen-Xer's. He described the Bible at one point as "the journal entries of God's people." This remark didn't even provoke a stir in the crowd that was populated mainly by pastors and leaders coming from an evangelical tradition.

Another main speaker stood up and said that in recent years the only certainty that he had was that he didn't know very much and that he doubted almost everything he knew. Eric Pickerill, who is our Joshua House pastor and at the time was about 29, went up to him and said, "How far does your doubt go? How far do you go in refusing to draw any lines?" Eric decided to push him to an extreme. He said, "For example, do you have any statement of faith at all in your church?" The man said, "No. The only statement of faith is that people must believe in Jesus." Eric said, "Well, what if a Jehovah's Witness showed up at your church. Would you allow him to lead?" The man said, "Well, I guess so, if he confessed Jesus."

Eric said, "But he's talking about a different Jesus. Wouldn't he lead people astray?" The leader just decided to punt and said, "Well, there's not that many people anyway and I guess people are free to choose."

Part of the challenge in preaching to contemporary audiences is the temptation toward timidity and an over cautiousness on the part of the preacher. You find pastors preaching timid sermons, sermons that water down the demands of the gospel, sermons that simply reflect back the culture of the people. Will Willimon, who certainly understands how to communicate to a postmodern culture said, "We always must remember that the gospel of Jesus Christ is an intrusive word. It cuts across the grain of societal wisdom. It calls into question rational sensibility. And it sticks its finger in the face of rabid relativism. It demands more than intellectual assent. It does not tolerate dilution in the company of modernism, postmodernism, or post-postmodernism."

Wilford McClay, a Tulane University professor, attended a funeral service of a young woman friend from his university. She died while giving birth to her second child. McClay wrote an outraged response to the minister's eulogy, which had shown gross insensitivity to the personal needs of the minister's grieving audience. McClay wrote:

Where the rest of us had been stunned into reflective silence, awed and chastened by this reminder of the slender thread by which our lives hang, the minister had other things in mind...he did not try to comfort her family and friends. Nor did he challenge us to remember the hard words of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done." Instead, he smoothly launched into a well-oiled tirade against the misplaced priorities of our society, in which billions of dollars were being poured into "Star Wars" research while young woman such as this one were being allowed to die on the operating table. That was all that this minister had to say. His eulogy was, in effect, a pitch for less federal spending on defense and more spending on the development of medical technology...the only thing omitted was an injunction that we write our Congressmen, or Ralph Nader about this outrage.

I could hard believe my ears...leave aside the eulogy's unspeakable vulgarity and its unintentional cruelty to the woman's family. Leave aside the flabby and clichéd quality of language and speech. I am willing to concede for the sake of argument that the minister may have been right in every thing he said...Nothing can alter the fact that he failed us, failed her, and failed his calling, by squandering a precious moment for the second-rate stump speech and by forcing us to hold our sorrow back in the privacy of our hearts, at the very moment it needed common expression. That moment can never be recovered.

Nothing that religion does is more important than equipping us to endure life's passages, by helping us to find meaning in pain and loss. With meaning, many things are bearable; but our eulogist did not know how to give it to us. All he had to offer us were his political desiderata.¹

One of the hungers that still persists, even in an age in which Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" has been replaced by "I doubt, therefore I am," even in an age of doubt and suspicion and cynicism, one of the persistent hungers in the human heart is for a sure word from God. People want to know, even with all the limitations of human language and all of our relativity and all of our cultural conditioning, "can I hear something from God that corresponds to reality?" One of the pressing issues for us as preachers is regaining our nerve.

Other Barriers for Preaching:

You are speaking to an audience that prefers choices and options in every realm of life. People want options at their fast food restaurants, and options when they purchase a car. A number of years ago I went to buy cold medicine. There was an entire aisle devoted to cold medicine in the pharmacy section of the supermarket – an entire aisle. There were capsules and tablets, liquid gel caps and antihistamines, decongestants, and cold medicines that were A.M. and P.M. I was just looking for the most massive dose of alcohol I could find. But I stood looking at the 200-300 options, including generic store brands that claimed to have the same ingredients, but whose boxes were not nearly as pretty as the nationally advertised brands. I just began to laugh in the aisle. There were way too many choices. I literally walked out of the store without buying any cold medicine. People today are faced with a blinding array of choices.

You are speaking to an audience that comes with a mindset of suspicion. People are suspicious about the government. Baby boomers have grown up in an atmosphere of cynicism and suspicion toward authority, the press, institutions, the military, and schools. If you see a stranded motorist by the side of the road, what is the typical response? Oh, I should immediately get out and help them? Or, perhaps they have a companion lying in wait.

You are speaking to an audience of relativists. They believe that all truth is simply a matter of opinion or perspective and they are regularly communicated to that all truth is merely a matter of perspective by the form that even the evening news takes. Newspapers love controversy. Every issue has two sides, or ten sides. So even the Pope is not a reliable spokesperson for the Catholic Church anymore. When the Pope issues a pronouncement on birth control or celibate priests or abortion, the Pope's voice is simply one opinion to the evening news among many regarding what a good Catholic should believe. The opinion poll has replaced authoritative spokespeople. For a moment, we get a snapshot of public opinion. So when the Pope speaks about birth control, we immediately turn to hear what Kathy McMichael, an Irish Catholic Social Worker in Boston thinks about the Pope's statements or Anthony Del Negro, an Italian fisherman from San Francisco thinks – "If Papa no play a the game, he shouldn't make a the rules."

You are speaking to an audience that rejects authority. There is at this point in history a tremendous *revolt against authority*. Many of the authorities in our culture

have been called into question, particularly in the 60's and 70's by people who felt betrayed. The Government lied to the people in Vietnam; at Watergate; the authority of parents has been challenged; the authority of schools has been challenged; the authority of the church has been challenged. And so it's not surprising that preaching, withal of its authoritative unit has been philosophically challenged as well. A writer at *Rolling Stone* magazine once said, "I'm against any form of organized thought. I'm against organized religion like the church. I don't see how you can organize 10 million minds to believe one thing." The idea is very widely held that there is no such thing as truth, which is absolute, and therefore universal, to the contrary, everything is relative.

George Barna, who is pretty much the preeminent demographer of Christianity in America did a survey not too long ago where he asked people, "Do you agree strongly; agree somewhat; or, disagree with the following statement: "There is no such thing as absolute truth. Different people can define truth in conflicting ways and still be correct." Sixty-seven percent of Americans agree with the statement that there is no such thing as absolute truth. The incredible thing is that fifty-two percent of those who identify themselves as "born again" agree with the statement that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Only one-quarter of those who identify themselves as "born again" strongly disagreed with the view that people can define truth in conflicting ways and each one could still be correct.

9: The Prerequisites for the Preacher

Prerequisite #1: Preaching is whole-person communication

It is essential that what we have going on in teaching or preaching is *whole-person communication*. What I mean is that a whole person, the teacher, tries to communicate a message that relates to the whole person, the listener. One of the things that will immediately turn off the listener in today's world is that the teacher does not come across as a whole person, but simply as a religious person. The kinds of questions that people are asking as they listen to a teaching are things like: Does this teacher live in the same house that she is describing to us? In other words, does she really drink what she is offering, or is she giving others water from a well that she would not dare drink from?

Very often, as I listen to teachings, they seem to have a far off, almost dreamy quality to them. There is no way that I believe, as I listen, that this person actually applies what they are saying to their own lives. Another way to put it is that, I am looking for reality when I listen to someone speak. The biggest turn-off for me is when I perceive the preacher is *just playing a role*. "Well, it's Sunday morning and I have this job to do. I better throw something together!" I would rather not speak than deliver something that didn't have at least a touch of what I believed God wanted to say in it.

Sometimes, it is obvious the preacher is simply mouthing some worn out trite sanctimonious kind of religious expressions that they believe they need to say because this is a religious context. But for real answers, they'll look in a marriage book or a book offering counseling advice. They almost certainly would not practice what they are saying.

It is essential that we establish from the front end that what we're saying has relevance to our own lives. This is whole person communication, communicating to our listeners that we live in the doctrinal houses that we're preaching. Tell your listeners – this is how this passage relates to me: when I was sick; when I was in college and doubted that Jesus was the Son of God; when I was counseling a couple as they considered a divorce; when I lost a loved one in a tragedy.

A tremendous source of boring teaching is that it is obvious to the listener that what is being said is not the teacher's treasure. You remember what Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also." It is obvious, very often, that the teacher's treasure is not what they're saying, and so their heart is not in their message. Again, whole person communication!

In regards to boring teaching, I believe it is a sin to bore your listeners. We are dealing with God's Word, eternal truth. If all we elicit is a big yawn because of our trite religious delivery, something is very wrong. If people are counting the ceiling tiles or looking at their watches, fidgeting with or reading their bulletins, something is really wrong. David Larsen says that one of the curses of the contemporary pulpit is its total predictability –

this is lethal! It must be evident in and through your preaching that you in fact have an ongoing relationship with Jesus and the Word of God.

It's not just the message that has to be real, you have to be real! You have to be yourself. I visited a church with a friend of mine down in Cincinnati some years ago. The preacher at my friend's church preached a fairly long message. But what was really notable about the talk was that he had an incredibly unusual affect. He had a very odd, little laugh. He would get to a point in his talk that was not particularly funny and he would let go with this little laugh. He would say, "Peter was out walking on the water (hee, hee, hee)" He did this about six or seven times through his talk. It was a very odd affect. So after church, my friend, like anyone in that situation, wanted me to like his church, and he said to me, "Well, Rich, what did you think of church this morning? What did you think of the message?" So I was complimentary and I said, "Oh, you have a wonderful church. The message was very good." And I couldn't resist adding, "You know, your pastor has a very odd affect." My friend said, "Really? What do you mean?" I said, "Have you ever noticed that he gives this little laugh after he speaks? He says something and then he says, 'hee...hee...hee.'" My friend said, "Yea, I have noticed that." So I said, "You know, I have only heard that once before in my life, I had heard it about 10 years previous to this time, but it was so remarkable that it stuck in my mind. It was by a pastor named Jerry Kirk. The only other time I have ever heard a laugh like that was from Pastor Jerry Kirk, who used to pastor here in Cincinnati." My friend exclaimed, "Oh, well that is very unusual because Jerry Kirk disciplined this guy." Can you imagine the effect of one person upon another that a person would actually take on the other person's laugh?

I have literally seen a number of Vineyard pastors take on John Wimber's affects. I have seen people cup their hand to their ear and say, "Hallo...hallo"; using John's phrases like, "I'm just a fat guy trying to get to heaven." That works if you are 250 pounds. But if you are 150, it doesn't work as well. The point is, be yourself! Don't put on Saul's armor. Some folks suggested to me that I sit on a stool in order to preach. Well, I'm not a laid-back Californian. The notion of me, a New York Jew, sitting on a stool when I preach, well I might as well be put in a canvas sack and have chains wrapped around me. I can't imagine sitting on a stool to preach. Be yourself! Find what works for you and be real. Be authentic.

Preaching is whole-person communication to another whole person

It's essential that we communicate not only to the religious part of our listener, but also to that part of the listener that has a sexual life, a working life, a life as a mother, a father, or a student. And not only just in the various roles people play, but also we have to focus on the whole person, that is, on the person who has feelings, the person of intellect, the person of the will, so that our messages address all three aspects of an individual and not just the emotions or the intellect. We are not in the business of producing "grapefruit" Christians whose lives are segmented in separate parts: religious life, family life, business life, etc... We are in the business of seeing people become "chocolate milk" disciples. We are aiming to see the kingdom of God absorb every sector and every square inch of a person's life.

And as we communicate as whole people to whole people, we use our bodies, moving our arms, using our voices, engaging our emotion, engaging our passion and our voice and our will and so on. So the very force of all that we are is being communicated in the message. Whole person communication to whole persons. People will see through us if we are merely performing a weekly religious duty.

Prerequisite #2: Preachers Must Have Conviction

A second prerequisite for the teacher or preacher is conviction. There is nothing that will rob a teaching of any kind of force in a listener's life more than a lack of conviction. If the speaker doesn't believe what he or she is saying, says what he or she is saying very tentatively, very weakly with a great deal of hesitations, then there is no way that the listener is going to buy it for their own lives. One of the keys for any kind of successful sale, is that the salesmen believe in his or her product. If the salesman approaches a sale and says, "Well, I don't really think this is very good, but maybe you'd like to try it and spend all of your money on it," you're not going to do very well. So I look for conviction. And when I think about conviction, it is in at least three areas:

Conviction About God

Does the person really have a conviction concerning the nature of God? That God is holy, that God will judge people, that God is a loving Father who cares for His children and cares for the person that you're speaking with? That God is incredibly gracious, that God will use this message to benefit the listener, that God is active at that moment to benefit the listener? Don't preach on hell at all unless you believe in it and believe that some of your hearers will go there if they do not respond to Christ. We must have convictions about God.

Convictions about God's Word

A preacher must believe that God's Word is powerful, that God's Word will accomplish an effect. God's Word contains the answers to all of life's problems. God's Word is like a hammer. God's Word is like fire, etc...

Conviction about the listener

The listener is precious to God. The listener is a sinner. The sinner struggles with guilt. The listener struggles with loneliness, and that the listener needs to be saved. These are kinds of convictions that a teacher or preacher carries in their heart as they prepare. I would say that a teachers or *preachers must have a love of people and a heart of mercy*. A person who teaches is simply not an academic, someone who spends all of their time in an office or in an ivory tower, but a person who understand people. Someone who understands what makes people tick, what their areas of discouragement are, where people are really living in areas of obedience, what people do and do not understand. So there must be a love for people, which is continually communicated in the message. We need to pray this into our hearts before we teach. When dealing with tough subjects such as abortion, or homosexuality, or divorce, don't pull the punch, but be redemptive. *Always communicate a way back to God!* I love 2 Samuel 14:14,

“Like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered, so we must die. But God does not take away life; instead, he devises ways so that a banished person may not remain estranged from him.”

Prerequisite #3: Preachers must have ability and be good speakers

Sometimes I wonder whether the obvious is not so obvious. Sometimes the most liberating thing you can potentially do as a leader is to communicate with someone else, that in fact, the area that they are struggling to do is not really their area of ministry or gifting. *A basic prerequisite* for teaching is what one might call the gift of speech. That is, that the person can communicate clearly and has some ability to bring a thought to bear in the life of the hearer. I'm not saying that you need to be a great orator or a Winston Churchill, but there is at least some gift of speech that the person has and also some force of intellect. Again, in the pulpit, we don't have to be Charles Spurgeon, but there is at least a level of ability or aptness that needs to be present.

It is amazing how we demand skill whenever we go out to the theater or whenever we watch TV. We want people who are standing up on a stage to have skill in their craft. Have you ever watched a really bad juggler? You know, the guy who has three balls up in the air and keeps dropping one? He is choking and sort of excusing his way through the act. He is trying to drink water, but the water is spilling. He keeps dropping the bowling pins. After a while, it becomes downright embarrassing to watch his lack of skill.

Or have you ever heard a really bad comedian? Someone who is simply not funny? The audience is groaning, embarrassed for him; then they are mad at him and want to take him out and kill him. Well, we demand skill in the craft from jugglers, comedians, and actors. And yet, somehow we have completely neglected the notion that people who get up and speak before us ought to have skill in the craft of speaking. I think we all have a responsibility to help people find out who they are. If preaching is not the deal, then what is? God has a place for each of us, but it injures the church and it injures the person if we are dishonest or cowardly and won't tell someone that they're ineffective.

Having spoken about ability, I would immediately add that a teacher or preacher is a person who has had to deal with many of their own inadequacies and excuses why they are not called to teach or preach. One of the things that I find interesting in the Word of God is that many of the people who were called to teach made all kinds of excuses for why they couldn't do it. Jeremiah said in Jeremiah 1:6 that he was too young. Isaiah said he was too sinful. Elijah said that he was too tired, that he had done too much already. Moses said that he simply couldn't, that he wouldn't be listened to. Esther wondered about her ability to bring a message to the king.

And I see this type of thing over and over again. Peter saying to the Lord that he should depart from him because Peter was sinful. The teacher or preacher is a person who has dealt with all of their own excuses and personal issues for why it is that they can't do what God has clearly called them to do. And one who is willing to be obedient

enough to listen to God's voice and willing to do what God wants them to do.

Prerequisite #4: Preaching requires Preparation/Study

A person who is going to teach or preach each week has to like preparation. You have got to enjoy digging into the text of the scripture and thinking fresh thoughts. If you are a person who just likes to deliver it up, but you don't like the preparation, then I am afraid your thoughts after a period of time will just run the same route. You will be skimming the same surface; running in the same tracks. You have to be a person who is constantly on the lookout for new ideas, and enjoy the thought of sitting down with the Bible week in and out and breaking open the text. The source of so much boring teaching is the pastor does not really enjoy the hard work of preparation. He simply grabs a few ideas from a commentary and runs with them. So every week is basically the same sermon no matter what the passage is.

10: The Preacher's Preparation

For those who feel pressed by other pastoral duties, by the importance of counseling, discipling, and leading so that you feel that you aren't able to take an adequate amount of time to prepare for your weekly messages, it is important to remind ourselves that preaching is an integral part of our pastoral ministry. Preaching does disciple people. It assists people to submit to God's Word, to hear what God thinks about a certain area of life. Preaching does offer counseling to people. We hear God's mind on matters. Preaching is also a vehicle for leadership. It does cast vision. It does assist people to follow God's lead for the church.

The preacher needs to read and study the Bible regularly

In particular, a teacher or preacher, to be effective, should read through the Bible, in my mind, at least once a year. The Bible is the backdrop for any passage that we are selecting. In order to teach accurately, you have to see that passage against the backdrop of the whole biblical drama and not just against the backdrop of one or two verses. Every preacher should have a good bible reading plan that gets them through the entire bible in a year. The Bible is a tremendous source of illustrations as we're seeking to illustrate our text. There's nothing that I think of as being better than being able to lift out an appropriate illustration from the Old or New Testament, the life of a great biblical character. At least I know that I enjoy hearing a well-chosen illustration from the scriptures. So, first of all, reading and studying the Bible is essential to our preparation.

The preacher needs to be grounded theologically

By grounded, I mean that you have a basic systematic, theological framework for your faith. If you are not grounded in a basic theological framework, both biblical and systematic, then your church will be pretty much of a "Baskins-Robbins 31 Flavors" kind of church. I talked with a dear friend of mine who for job purposes needed to leave this Vineyard and he traveled to another part of the country where he went to another Vineyard. I got a really tragic report back from him when I saw him a couple of years later. I said, "How is church going?" He answered, "My wife and I are driven crazy in this church. From month to month, we don't know what *the basic message* of the church is going to be. One month we are on this prophetic deal and the next month we are into all of us needing to fast for three weeks, and the following month God is going to bring revival. The next month the guy is onto something else. This feels like Baskins-Robbins 31 Flavors. What flavor of the month will it be this month?"

The ride does not have to be that bumpy. You come to some conviction points about the scriptures and about the nature of God. It doesn't mean that we don't grow in our theology. It doesn't mean that we don't change from time to time as God matures us and gives us more whole insights. A sign of maturity is that you are willing to revise your perspectives. But, by and large, there *ought to be a thread of consistency* to produce a healthy church. My theological framework is Reformed, kingdom-centered,

thoroughly committed to an experience of the Spirit. This framework will guide what the basic message is of the church that I preach at week in and week out.

The Importance of Constantly Reading and Studying Theology

Theological reflection needs to be front and center for any preacher because truth must be front and center. If you aren't regularly immersing yourself in theology, the structure of your thoughts and even the content of your thoughts are coming from somewhere. The way you categorize things, the labels you place on things, the issues that you are concerned about. If they are not coming from theology, they are coming from somewhere else. It is really a sign of health if along with all the practical stuff you are reading, you've always got a theological book going. The great alternative in the last 50 years to theology is psychology. So many messages use the categories and thought forms and approaches of modern psychology. Often these approaches, even by Christian counselors, have virtually nothing to do with the category or approaches or thought forms of the Bible. One helpful thing about theology is not only does it give us the appropriate categories, but also it gives us the categories in the appropriate portions.

An old definition of heresy is not that an individual is propagating falsehood. Rather, the individual is *overemphasizing a certain truth and underemphasizing other truths*. In other words, they don't have the truths in the right proportion. You'll see this when a pastor takes something that is a small truth in the Bible and emphasizes it week after week so that other really large truths drop off the map. Preaching on tongues may be worth one message, but it's not a six-month study. Neither is the pre-tribulational rapture. Theology assists us to *emphasize the great themes in the Bible* in the right proportion – creation, the fall, redemption, grace, forgiveness, covenant, sin, judgment, God's law, God's kingdom. One helpful way to evaluate our preaching is to flip open a systematic theology and ask yourself, how many of these themes have I touched on in the last year of my preaching. What great themes of scripture have I been neglecting? What hobbyhorse have I been riding?

A Preacher Needs to Pray and be Prayed For

Prayer is essential to our preparation. And by prayer I mean, very often we resist the impulse to pray and when we sense an impulse to pray, we need to go with that and pray. One of the things I do, which may be surprising to some of you, is in preparing a talk, I spend a great deal of time praying in tongues. I find that praying in tongues clears my mind and helps me to focus upon what God is trying to say to the people. Pray, and if you can pray in tongues, pray in tongues. The point is that we need to be in touch with God as we prepare to preach. We are not simply unveiling all we have learned through bible training or our experiences. God has us in a specific place at a specific time to communicate a message from His Word to a group of people.

Charles Spurgeon attributed the blessings of God on his ministry in London to the faithfulness of people to pray for him. You may have heard the story of five college students who came to hear Spurgeon preach at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. While waiting for the doors to open, they were greeted by a gentleman who offered to show

them around. “Would you like to see the heating plant,” he asked? They were not particularly interested because it was a hot day in July. Nevertheless, they followed him down a staircase where he opened a door whispering, “This is our heating plant.” The surprised students saw 700 people bowed in prayer interceding for the service and for their pastor. Softly closing the door, the gentleman introduced himself to them. He was Spurgeon. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if you even had 10 or 15 people gathered together to pray for you and to pray for your service each week?

A Preacher Needs to Chew on the Text

I think you need to chew on the text for several days. An unfortunate thing that happens to many of us is that we are given an assignment with a day’s notice. I think that’s generally very unfair to the teacher. So as leaders, we need to give some lead time and be at least organized enough to give people a week or a couple of weeks to chew on a text because very often God gives us things to say and develops thoughts over the course of the week.

Great thoughts are not developed in a vacuum. Most of us are adapters of other people’s thinking. And there are not many of us who can by sheer insight or revelation, continually create or invent a wheel. So, it is by listening to other great thinkers or other great writers that we can develop our own thoughts and then present them to people.

Now, I’m not suggesting here that we preach other people’s messages. In fact, very often one of the worse things we can do is to simply regurgitate what somebody else said. On occasion that will work, but most often it will have that far-off quality that I described before. In other words, it will be obvious to the listener that the person who is speaking has never lived in the house he is constructing. So while you should read and listen to great thoughts, it’s important that we try to make those thoughts our own before we present them to others. We need to read commentaries in descending order from technical to exegetical to expository application. (See Commentary List in Appendix A) We also need to read about the culture widely. (See Reading List – newspapers, journals, magazines, books, online resources in Appendix A)

11: The Preparation of the Message

Having selected my text, the first and primary question I ask myself is what does this passage mean? As I mentioned before, by meaning, we're talking about what this passage meant to the original writer. Gordon Fee's How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth, gives us the basics on how we discover what the original text meant. It describes different kinds of ways that we should be interpreting the Bible text, having the text say what it was intended to say.

Essentially there are **Four Levels of Preaching**

- The Message and outline drawn from the text.
- The Message drawn from the text; outline artificial.
- The Message generally biblical; use of text present.
- The Message is Rotary Club moralism.

We want our messages and our outlines to come from the text of scripture. We must develop our skills in interpreting the Bible.

The Interpretation of the Bible

Consider the following interpretation of a biblical text from Justo Gonzalez, who is probably the foremost prominent Hispanic theologian in the United States, his 3-volume *History of Christian Thought* is one of the best church histories available. In fact, it was from Gonzalez's volumes that I learned church history as I sat under a Jesuit priest in college. In the last decade, he published the groundbreaking *Manana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (1990). Gonzalez mentioned a sermon he heard preached from a text from the book of Revelation: "And the sea was no more."

"Why will the sea be no more," asked the preacher? "Because in the sea there are monsters. There are sharks like Jaws. But the worst of all the monsters of the sea is the octopus. The octopus has eight tentacles and it grabs you and squeezes you and crushes you.

And so is the octopus of sin. It too has eight tentacles. First there is the tentacle of pride...then there is the tentacle of lust..." And so he went on and on finally coming to his conclusion, "Therefore, let us come out of the tentacles of the octopus of sin and into the arms of Jesus."

Now there are lots of things that can be said about this ridiculous sermon. But the ultimate criticism is that it ignores the authority of scripture because the Bible is claimed to say whatever the preacher wants it to say. The preacher is not submitting himself to the authority of the Bible. Sadly, the people are discouraged from the study of scripture even if they are encouraged in their Christian life by listening to this kind of preaching. They see no way that they could have learned from the biblical text what the preacher claims to have found in it. Rather than encouraging their hearers to dig into the Bible for themselves, such preachers are actually discouraging them. The Bible becomes this

mysterious book that only those with specialized education or gifts could possibly be able to understand.

The preacher must avoid at all costs the “Lone Ranger” approach

We are not the first people to have read the Bible. We need to hear what the community of faith has said about the particular text that we are handling. Even if we disagree with a common interpretation, we ought to at least have some reasons for our disagreement. Justo Gonzalez says, “The Lone Ranger did not roam the west alone. He had Tonto with him.” Tonto, whose name means “dim wit” as any Hispanic in the Southwest would know, Tonto, who hardly ever spoke except for an occasional meaningless “Kemo Sabe,” in spite of this, the white hero was called “Lone” because his Indian companion who repeatedly saved his life simply didn’t count. He didn’t count for two reasons. First, he was seen as a projection of his white leader, and second because the Lone Ranger never seemed to take the time to listen to him.

A lot of preachers relate to the community of faith the way the Lone Ranger related to Tonto. The community is almost meaningless. *It never challenges our interpretation.* Or if the community does challenge our perspective, we classify them as Tontos, dim wits, whose perspective we don’t have to take into account. The beauty of our home fellowship groups, especially if we do inductive studies and the groups are truly mixed by way of age, gender, marital status and race, is that we get to hear the Bible from a different voice. One of the easiest ways to think about the importance of the community of faith is to simply ask men, “List five passages that are the most significant for women.” And then ask women to list five passages that are the most significant for themselves. The chances are that there will be almost no overlap. The men will find passages that specifically mention women, and particularly their limitations. The women will list passages that generally apply to Christians. Men believe that the Bible is addressed to them, that men are normative human beings and that only those texts that speak specifically to females will be significant to women. Women read the Bible as if the whole book belongs to them. What a shock to men!

Message Development – Four Key Questions

The **first question** in sermon development is *what is the central theme of this text?* What is it about? What is the “big idea” of the passage that I am preaching on?

The **second question** you need to ask is what does this text mean? The question here is *what did it mean to the original hearers?* It is here that traditional preachers tend to spend too much time and pastors in Vineyard churches and seeker churches tend to spend too little time. But unless you find out what the text means, you are not submitting your message to the authority of the scripture. You simply can’t begin with application. Finding out what the text means involves the use of various tools, Bible dictionaries, and commentaries. Many of us fail to appreciate some so simple as grammar as being essential in interpreting a text. A while ago I heard someone teaching from 1 Corinthians 11 and he talked about how important it was for an individual to examine himself or herself and not take communion if they were unworthy. This led to a whole series of questions by the preacher, which of course caused the

church to engage in a morbid introspection to see whether they were worthy to take communion. This, of course, takes Paul's argument and turns it entirely upon its head. The apostle Paul never asked the question about whether someone is unworthy or worthy to take communion. In his discussion of the communion table, Paul never raises the issues he could have regarding the issues of sexual sin, lawsuits, and doctrinal error. Unfortunately, this particular pastor didn't know the difference between an adjective "unworthy" and an adverb "unworthily." Rather than preach a message on the good news in which the apostle Paul is communicating to the Corinthians that everyone of you has a place at the table, taking the communion unworthily is to take it in a way that excludes our neighbor and narrows the heart of God, this poor person stumbled over the grammar. And because this person didn't examine the grammar of the text, the table became the exclusive purview of those who felt "worthy" to take communion. Paul's whole point is that the communion table is an announcement of good news. Anyone, rich, poor, sinner, broken, addict, messed up, screwed up, can take communion.

The **third question** to ask that Haddon Robinson very helpfully mentions in his book titled *Biblical Preaching* that ought to be asked (and one that preachers often neglect) is the question *is the message true? Do we really believe what this text is saying?* We live in an age of pervasive skepticism. Everyone is marketing to us. Everyone is over promising. Everywhere we look someone has their hand out and is trying to sell us something. It is an amazing thing when a Christian moves from a place that says, "Of course, I'm supposed to believe this," to "God has shown me in my own experience that this text, this assertion, is really true."

It is not enough to explain the statement "God is good." As you are developing the message, one of the questions you ought to ask very explicitly is, is this true? *What does the goodness of God mean to the family of a mom who recently just passed away of leukemia? How is God good to that family? What does the goodness of God mean to those who lost their lives in the World Trade Center disaster? What does the goodness of God mean for the single mother? What does the goodness of God mean for the man who lost his wife in a car accident? What does the goodness of God mean to the girl who grew being sexually abused?*

There was a woman who came to our church immediately following 9/11 and she said, "I was waiting for you to quote Romans 8:28." This was her first time in the church. She said, "If you did, I was going to jump up and walk out." That was her litmus paper test. She was tired of hearing pastors take disasters and mention a text like Romans 8:28 without answering the question, is this true? Do I really believe this? Do I expect my hearers to really believe it?

The **fourth developmental question** that must be asked and answered is *what difference does this make?* In other words, 'So what?' Truth that merely hangs in the air is not biblical! The Bible was not written to be some abstract theology. It was written to change our lives. The Word of God, we're told in 2 Tim. 3:17, is useful. It has a purpose. It is not just there for us to quote, measure, weigh, dissect, entertain

ourselves, it is useful. For what? For teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness so that the man and woman of God might be thoroughly equipped for every good work. If our messages don't equip people to be different, to act differently, to believe differently, then we haven't done our job as preachers.

So the four key questions we ask every time we come to a passage in our message preparation are:

1. *What is the big theme?*
2. *What does it mean?*
3. *Is it true?*
4. *So what?*

Historically, traditional evangelical preachers have simply rated an "F" on question #4. What difference does this make? Another way to put it is that there are lots of card-carrying evangelicals who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, who will fight you to the death over the particulars of your statement of faith regarding inerrancy versus infallibility, but who are practical heretics in their behavior because preachers haven't brought the scriptures *screamingly home hitting people between the eyes and applying the scriptures to particular situations in the hearers' lives*. So what if we understand what the text meant to the original hearers? We also need to understand what the text means for me. It would be helpful as you write out your sermon to simply put "so what?" in the margins. Why are you saying what you are saying? Because you studied the Essenes or read a commentary about them? I'm not saying that background information is unhelpful, but if you go for more than four minutes without a "So What?" you are going too long.

Finding the Dominant Thought

Having discovered the meaning of the passage, I now search for the dominant thought or *the message that God wishes to communicate through this passage*. By a dominant thought, perhaps an illustration might be useful here. I am looking for a rifle shot to take down the moose I'm aiming for. Instead of firing off a shotgun aimed in a million different directions, running after every rabbit that I can find, I'm looking for the rifle shot, *the one dominant thought that runs through the passage*. I want to bag a moose not run after rabbits. That is the message. This requires a great deal of meditation on a passage.

But you should be able to reduce that dominant thought to *a couple of sentences which make up your major proposition*. Another way to think about having one dominant message, or one dominant thought, is that you are attempting to picture yourself driving a stake into a wall. You have a large metal stake that you are driving into a wall. That is your dominant theme. *And this thought must be concrete!* Then your job with your subsidiary points is to simply toss your rings onto that dominant point. *All of the points that you make in a message ought to drive your basic message forward*. When I mentor preaching students, this is often the weakest point. I'll ask, "What is your sermon about?" They'll have the most abstract or convoluted statement. "It's about Jesus and how He died and how we need to follow and how thanksgiving is good." "It's

about how we need to forsake ourselves and how God is a trinity.” You want to stake your dominant thought and then have every point be pearls that fit onto that one string.

Now, every once in a while, you will not be able to do that and a ring will fall to the ground. But, by and large, a good sermon ought to have most of the rings hanging on that stake. You are not preaching six messages when you get up. *You are preaching one message* and you are proving it by your subsidiary points.

Now the way that we discover what *the message* or *the theme* is, is through meditation upon the passage, but also in prayer. We are asking the question, “What is God saying?” We need to take time in prayer and get before God and clear our minds. I’ve already done scripture study on the passage and found out it’s meaning. But now I’m looking for the heart of God as He wishes to communicate to His people. So in prayer, I am asking God, “God, what is your heart? What is the message you want to bring from this passage?”

12: Preaching with a Purpose

One of the essential questions that needs to be asked of every sermon is why are you preaching this sermon? It is certainly not sufficient for you to answer, “Because it is 9:30 on a Sunday morning and I have to say something.” Or “Because I covered John 3 last week, I’m going to teach on John 4 this week.” It is like a football coach who is really happy because his team blocked well, and ran really sharp routes, and amassed 450 yards of offense, but they lost 35-0. *The purpose of football is to score more points than your opponent.*

Henry Ward Beecher said, “A sermon is not like a Chinese firecracker to be fired off for the noise it makes. It’s a hunter’s gun and with every discharge, he should look to see his game fall.” Any preacher ought to ask, *what am I hunting for today?*

One very simple way to discover the purpose for your preaching is to uncover the purpose that would be in the mind of the biblical writer. Biblical passages weren’t written down because the writer had a need to express himself, or because something religious had to be said on a certain occasion. There was a purpose. The epistles were written to contend against legalism and to answer certain questions. The gospels had a purpose. John says that he wrote the various accounts of Jesus to stir faith. “These are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you might have life in his name” (John 20:31).

A good way to determine whether you have a purpose is to ask yourself *what exactly do I want my hearers to do as a result of this message?* Do I want them to reconcile a relationship? Do I want them to believe something about God or about their identity in Christ? Am I asking them to be more involved in world missions? What are the *results* I am aiming for?

Now, *the problem* with most preaching is that what the preacher is asking the congregation to do is treated in rather abstract terms. So, for example, the preacher will tell the congregation, “It is really important that we serve each other.” No one is going to disagree with that. The truth is flying about six inches above the hearers’ heads. *What you want to do with the truth is to hit the hearer between the eyes.* Who cares about serving each other, or the value of witnessing? Everyone can sign on to that.

It’s when you start *screwing the truth down into the person’s forehead*, it’s when you say, “Husbands, do you realize that when you come home at night that the pot on the stove is not a self-cleaning pot.” “You, of course, understand, husbands, that service means responding at 2:00 a.m. when your baby cries instead of pretending that you are asleep.” *You direct each message and each statement at real people regarding real issues!*

If you are teaching on healing, you may say something like this: “Risk taking in healing means that the next time someone at your job says that they aren’t feeling well, no

matter who they are, you offer to pray for them. In preaching, we cannot allow truth to hang in abstract statements. We must drive every point *all the way home into the lives of actual people*.

The Relevance of Every Message

I need now to discover the relevance of that message for the listeners. Here I'm thinking about the various kinds of ways that I can apply that message to the people. Along the way, I'm asking and answering a lot of questions that a listener might be asking and answering. How would this apply to the worker? How would this apply to the mother? Are there any objections that a person might have when they listen to this? And I try to ask and answer those objections. *Anticipate their questions and answer them*. You are not only exegeting a passage; *you are exegeting the audience*.

So, I've got my major proposition. I've understood the meaning of the passage. I'm beginning to make application. And I write those down on a sheet of paper. Again, I write these down to ensure that what I am saying is *clear*. Is the major proposition that I am arguing in *this* message clear? Do I clearly understand the meaning of the passage and can I explain it clearly? Are my applications clear and filled with force?

The Three Worlds of the Preacher – What we need to juggle in every message

The world of the Bible

God spoke to people at a particular moment in history. What did this message mean for the original hearers? The role of the preacher here is that of *biblical exegete*.

The world of the 21st century

The second world we must consider is that of the 21st century. What is going on in our culture? Here the preacher gives language to people so that they can recognize different trends around them. For example, the trend to turn everything into entertainment, the use of sex in completely inappropriate settings to sell, market and attract attention. The role of the preacher is that of *cultural observer and prophet*. Explain what it feels like and the messages that jump at us when we enter into a shopping mall or a clothing store. What is it like for a teenager to walk around in that environment? What is it like for a single person to be bombarded with messages of how to lose weight? What is it like for a mother to be told and sold the message that her home must be worthy of the Pottery Barn Catalogue?

The world of church

The third world that the preacher must become acquainted with is the world of the church that he or she is pastoring. Is the church urban, suburban, rural, poor, middle-class, wealthy, experiencing unemployment, the death of a beloved church member, the critical illness of a child of a leader, tremendous church growth? Here the preacher's role is that of the *shepherd*. The good shepherd calls his sheep by name. Preachers ought to know the aches, the issues, the

concerns, the fears, and the joys of the congregation that he or she is preaching to.

Building a Bridge to Your Listeners

Everyone wants to be understood. One of the most effective things you can do in preaching is to get inside the skin of your hearers, to communicate what they *feel, think, believe, and experience*. Part of the way that we preachers can do that is by listening to people. Pay attention to what people are engaged in, what they are paying attention to. We listen to people in counseling when we're sitting and watching our kids play sports.

Fred Craddock in his wonderful book on preaching talks about *the value of empathetic imagination*. It is impossible for us to have every single life experience that a person in our congregation might have. All of us have not had a long-term chronic disease or pain. We haven't all lost children. We haven't all lived alone or been fired. We haven't all lost our spouses. But even if we had lost a child, or lost our spouse, or had a disease, *even then* we stand in a different place than the person we are ministering to who has had a similar experience. No two experiences on earth are the same. There's always a distance between two experiences. We don't have another person's background, their temperament, their families, their viewpoints.

How do we overcome the distance between us and our hearers? Craddock recommends empathetic imagination. By *empathetic imagination* he means that you take a blank sheet of paper and write at the top of it: *What's it like to be...* and then take some facet of human experience.

- What's it like to be 40 and single?
- What's it like to be out of work and unable to find work for six months?
- What's it like to be 17 years old?
- What's it like to be in love?
- What's it like to be stuck at home with 2 preschoolers or to be retired and to feel useless?

And then we write down the thoughts and feelings, the concerns of the person who is in that situation.

Another way to reduce the distance between our listeners and us is by *assisting people to see themselves in the text*. Who do we identify with in the story of the prodigal – the father who loves his sons, both of whom need forgiveness? The younger son who is full of shame as he walks through the party that's been thrown in his honor; the older brother who is sitting outside upset wondering of the fairness of throwing parties for siblings who abuse their families.

It is very important that we, as preachers, *do not assume the posture* of critics of our congregations. So many of our sermons place us as the preachers along with Jesus and the congregation along with the Pharisees. Or a message can place us with the Father in the story and the congregation with the Prodigal. We can eliminate the

distance by showing how we are the prodigal; how we ourselves are the Pharisees. *Seeing ourselves* in the story is something that Michelangelo did when he carved his Pieta of Nicodemus holding the crucified body of Jesus. Michelangelo apparently went through some type of conversion experience when he was an old man. He strongly identified with Nicodemus and was struck by the story of Nicodemus being born again as an old man. When Michelangelo carved his Pieta, he carved his own face as Nicodemus. That's what you want people to do. *You want them to see themselves* in the story so sharply that they have their own face in the face of Nicodemus, or the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet with her tears and wiped his feet with her hair.

Subdivide Major Propositions - Outlining

I regularly subdivide the major proposition and the message into subsidiary points. I have this proposition, now I want to argue that proposition through 3-5 points, all of which should sustain the message. I try to have a progression in thought so that the thought moves from A to B to C to D, that it's a sustained argument. Having divided up the message into subsidiary points, all of which serve the dominant thought, I begin to write out the talk adding my introduction and conclusion. Regarding the outlines, it should be symmetrical, elegant, and positively memorable.

Writing Out Your Message

I believe that if you have the time, you ought to try to write out the talk as much as possible in longhand. The reason I advocate using longhand, and particularly I would say this for the first number of years that an individual teaches, is because one of the greatest weaknesses I see in the delivery of a message is in the transitions. When a person is merely outlining their talks, they haven't thought through the logical and transitional links from one point to another. And so what ends up happening is *there is a very artificial kind of skeleton*, a skeleton which is presented right up front to a person with a kind of scaffolding on a building appearance. If you write things out longhand, you can hide your skeleton more neatly by covering it with other kinds of words other than first, second, and third.

13: Illustrations that are Memorable

Charles Spurgeon was a self-educated Baptist, who used to preach to a congregation of 6000 in his metropolitan tabernacle in South London every week. He used to pack in crowds everywhere he spoke. In fact, at the age of 23, nearly 24,000 people packed the Crystal Palace to hear him speak. In his heyday, his Penny Pulpit Series sold at London newsstands and railway stations at the rate of 25,000 per week. I feel fantastic if I sell 200-300 tapes after one of my messages. 25,000 a week is unheard of!

Spurgeon combined preaching prowess and evangelistic fervor with a deep concern for social issues such as slavery, alcoholism, and urban poverty. A classic work on illustrations is contained in Spurgeon's "Lectures To My Students." His sermons team with stories, anecdotes, news events, analogies and illustrations from nature.

Regarding illustrations, Spurgeon quotes Dr. Samuel Johnson's literal rendering of the word "illustrate." Illustration literally means *to throw light on a subject*. Spurgeon illustrates the definition with an illustration – the image of a window. He says, "Illustrations are really windows in our messages that brighten or illumine the subject." Thus, Spurgeon says, "To every preacher of righteousness as well as to Noah, wisdom gives the command, 'A window shall thou make in the ark.'" Without the window, the inside of the ark would be dark.

Illustrations allow abstract truths to become *vivid and clear* to the mind of the hearer. It is the role of the preacher to labor to make things plain. Illustrations not only make things vivid and plain, illustrations make things interesting. Spurgeon says, "A building without windows would be a prison, rather than a house." Illustrations give the congregation a little bit of time to mentally breathe and allow their imaginations to play before they have to engage again in the hard work of listening to exposition. Everyone likes a good story. Even teenagers and children will perk up their ears.

Illustrations should not be too numerous. It is important, according to Spurgeon, that we not use too many illustrations. Spurgeon says we must remember that illustrations are not the strength of a sermon any more than a window is the strength of a house. It is common to find sermons so full of metaphors that they become weak. Our house should be built with substance drawn from the scriptures.

It is also the case that the window ought to fit the construction of the house, just as an illustration ought to fit the construction of the message. Some people stick illustrations in crazy places just because they have a good story. The purpose of an illustration is to illustrate, to shed light on a particular truth. How many times have you used a story, an illustration, just because it was really interesting?

Regarding the number of illustrations, Spurgeon uses a different metaphor that is of salt upon food. A little salt is good. It seasons and brings out the flavor of the food. But Spurgeon says you don't need to empty the saltcellar upon a piece of meat, otherwise it produces nausea.

Illustrations ought to be *simple and direct*. Some people elaborate so long in telling the story that you lose the point. Have you ever talked with a person who has to paint the entire picture? I remember years ago counseling a person that just drove me crazy because she was the kind of person that had to paint an entire picture before getting to the point. Her statements usually went something like this, "You know, while I was driving over here, I passed Northland Mall. My nephew, my sister's son works at Northland Mall. He works at the American Eagle shop. What's really interesting is that he got his job through a friend of mine, who just graduated from OSU a few years ago. She majored in accounting. In fact, she took Dr. Jenkin's class. She's working downtown right now for the Department of Taxation. Her name is Barbara. She lives next door to..." Now, I don't know what this story is about or where it is going or why it is being told to me. So in our stories and with are illustrations, we need to be simple and direct.

Where Do We Get Illustrations From?

People are always asking where do you get illustrations from? In general, *I would avoid illustration books*. They tend to have a very distant and artificial feeling to them. I certainly wouldn't use illustrations borrowed from a different era, such as Spurgeon's illustrations. To begin an illustration with, "The story is told about a lad who grew up in Aberdeen and was the son of a poor blacksmith," might have a slightly dated feel to it.

A great source of illustrations, of course, is *personal experience*. Let me suggest some limits with regards to personal illustrations. One of the limits that are often violated by pastors, particularly in an age of vulnerability and tell-all confessions, is the appropriate boundary between the pastor's life and the congregation's life. While there needs to be an overlap, an intersection between the two spheres, there ought to be a clearly delineated boundary in which there are non-intersecting sections of the pastor and the congregation.

I've watched pastors who do not respect boundaries between their own lives and the life of their congregation begin to turn the congregation into an extension of the pastor's family and personal life. The congregation rises and falls with each trauma or victory in the pastor's life. My general belief is that people in the congregation have their own problems, their own trials, and their own difficulties. I'm there to serve them. And I've watched this rather sick relationship occur between pastor and church when the pastor's vulnerability gets perverted into an almost exhibitionism.

I know it's a tightrope. The pastor must always be authentic. It's important that we not only share victories, but difficulties. Nevertheless, not all difficulties should be shared with the whole congregation. In sharing personal illustrations, boundaries ought to be respected. In sharing personal illustrations, family relationships ought to be respected. Under no circumstance should an illustration that might prove to be a bit embarrassing to a family member ever be shared without permission. And as a general rule, I would not share embarrassing moments in the life of my family. Inasmuch as possible, your children and your wife should not live in a fishbowl. People already know enough about

the pastor's family. You don't have to pour gasoline on the fire. As a general rule, if someone is going to be a hero in the story, make sure it is one of your family members, or your spouse and not yourself. Almost always Marlene looks fantastic in my stories. If you are going to look good in your stories, share the story with honesty.

Private conversations and private letters ought to be kept private unless you explicitly ask permission to share them. When someone sends me a great story or testimony that I think I might want to employ in the future, I always send an email thanking them for their story and asking for explicit permission to share it in the future.

Illustrations also come from *reading*. I get a large portion of my illustrations from books and articles that I read. If you come upon a great comic strip, something from a magazine or newspaper cut it out and file it. Knowing where you're going in future messages, gives you some opportunity to begin to let the creative juices flow.

Using Quotes and Stats in our Messages

A well-chosen quote can add authority and credibility to what you are saying. But remember, you aren't writing a scholarly paper. Some people feel the need to back up every statement with an authoritative quote. I frankly believe that *if a message has more than 3-4 quotes, it has too many quotes*. And only the very best possible quote ought to be more than a paragraph. Generally, *a quotation ought to be brief*. I place a very high value on *maintaining eye contact* with the congregation. If you are reading too long, you are creating distance. Preaching is an extended conversation with a friend. Don't read to them! It is perfectly acceptable to paraphrase someone. But a quotation is like salt. It ought to enhance the flavor of the message, not bury it. In all of our messages, we want to minimize distance and to create a connection with each person.

It is essential that we use care concerning who you are quoting from. I would be extremely careful about quoting somebody's supposed deathbed conversion. So many stories that are passed around through Christian pulpits are Christian urban legends. We have an ethical duty to our congregation to make sure that the quotation is accurately citing the facts. On the rare times I read to my congregation a quotation is when I read a testimony from someone in the church. People generally can care less about quotations from theologians. In general, in case you haven't noticed it, theologians are not considered authorities on almost anything in contemporary America.

And if you are going to use a quotation, *make sure that it makes the point memorably*. C.S. Lewis is, of course, the source of an enormous number of memorable quotes. So for example, in talking about whether he was a God-seeker or not, Lewis said, "I sought for God as much as a mouse seeks for a cat. God was precisely the person I used my best efforts to avoid." Use quotes the way you use illustrations, to make a point more vivid, *to nail a point into a person*. Our illustrations and our quotes are there to connect with a person right where they are living. The purpose is not to make the preacher look smart or well read.

Statistics are particularly helpful with contemporary numbers-conscious people. For example, the growth of Christianity, especially the evangelical and charismatic variety can be powerfully illustrated through the use of a few statistics. The spread of Christianity around the world, moving from a European, North American white man's religion at the beginning of the 20th century, to being far African, Latin American, and Asian religion can be supported by a few powerful statistics.

14: The Art of Application

A sermon which does not build a bridge to an individual life is neither expository preaching or biblical. The main object of your message is to apply what you are saying to the hearer. When you think through the purpose of your message, the purpose always has in it a strong element of application. The sermon has got to become very personal.

Courage Required

It takes courage to bring a message screaming home. It doesn't take a great deal of courage to talk about the importance of giving financially. It takes much more courage to single out those in your congregation who are making more than \$150,000 and *speak directly to them*. Likewise, it is one thing to talk in general terms about divorce. It is another thing to speak directly to people, who have been divorced, or to people who are contemplating divorce, or to people who are currently separated. Don't just talk about the fact that we should serve each other. Yes, this is a grand idea. Say, "Husbands, this means that the pot on the stove isn't a self-cleaning pot. Put the paper down, get off of the couch, and clean the pot." What you want to do with the truth you are proposing in each message is "screw the truth" into their foreheads so that they can never forget it. You do not want to leave the truth flying six inches above a person's head. You want to drive it all the way home into their actual lives. As you prepare your message, you should think that you are talking to actual people, individuals, rather than a massive audience.

The Best Compliment a Preacher Can Receive

One of the best compliments anyone can give you is to come up to you after you have preached and say, "I felt as if you were speaking directly to me the whole message." *That's what you're aiming for.* You want an individual to feel that you are engaged in a personal conversation with them, not the whole world, not even with the rest of the congregation, just them. You would like someone in the congregation to vaguely feel that someone has told on them, that you got tipped off ahead of time, regarding their particular issue or problem. That their wife or husband called and asked you to speak on the subject. I can't tell you how many times I've heard from people, "You were speaking today the conversation or the argument that my wife and I just had last night. You must have been a fly on the wall at our home this week. I was thinking the very same thing."

Part of the art of personal application is to get inside the head of your hearer and give voice to their thoughts and *simply say what they would say, if they were honest*. Not what they would say in a Bible study or small group. But what they would say in their more honest moments.

One of my favorite comments is to have a guest say, "Did my friend call you ahead of time? Did my husband call you? Did you hear about what I was going through with my roommate?" When someone presents me with that, on the one hand I'm incredibly

grateful that the Holy Spirit is hitting this person between the eyes. On the other hand, I'm always tempted to give a sort of sarcastic remark, "Yes, I decided this morning to prepare a message that would only apply to you. I realize we have 6000 people come each week, but the entire design of my message was for you."

In regards to application, let me be very clear. When you make something personal, *you ought not* to have a particular individual in mind as you prepare. It would be an entire abuse of the pulpit to preach to someone in the church. I know that you want to. I know you want to get your shot in. Just don't do it.

Applications ought to be made continually throughout the message. I don't believe in applications that hang on the end of the message like the tail on the end of a dog. Application is not a mere appendage to a message. I don't believe that contemporary preachers can follow the traditional method of teaching doctrine for a half an hour and then tie it up with preaching application at the end. Contemporary audiences have a very short attention span. Remember you are talking to people who watch TV for seven hours a day. Long sustained arguments that lay an enormous foundation for an application simply will not be followed.

I was talking with a pastor recently and I said, "May I share something with you very affectionately about your sermon method?" He said, "OK." I said, "Your method is to take 15 nails and gently tap them into a board one after another. Then you come a long with a sledgehammer a half an hour into your message and pound them all down. The truth is that by the time you get back to pounding the first nail down, it has already dropped out of the mind of the hearer. *My method is to drive the nail all the way down before starting on the next nail.* If something is worth speaking about, it also ought to be worth immediately applying."

Now, I'm not suggesting that you have to apply all background material every time you set the stage for something and make an application. But in general, if you are going more than 4-5 minutes in your message without applying, you are going too long. You can tell whether an application is good or not by whether you get some type of emotional reaction. Is there any bite? Is there any sting to your application? Does it create any comfort, any encouragement, any rebuke?

Make Applications Personal

Again, the more personal you get, the stronger the emotional reaction will be. And this is good as long as you are handling the truth honestly and don't just have an axe to grind. You will encounter resistance, but that's to be expected. Martin Luther once said that when we preach the truth, the dogs will begin to bark. He advised his young disciple, Philip Melancthon, "Preach, so that if people don't hate their sin, they will hate you." Application ought to make the truth very accessible.

The application must be extremely personal. There is a wonderful illustration in the Old Testament about the importance of getting very personal. In 2 Kings 4, a widow's son died. Elisha sends his servant Gehazi to heal the boy. Elisha's instruction to his servant

Gehazi is, “Lay my staff on the boy’s face.” Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the boy’s face, but there was no response. So Elisha had to go personally. We read, “He went in and shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the Lord. He then got on the bed and laid upon the boy mouth to mouth, eye to eye, hands to hands, as he stretched himself out upon him, the boy’s body grew warm. Elisha turned away and walked back and forth across the room and then got on the bed and stretched out upon him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes.”

Now Elisha was probably getting a big more personal with the boy than we would permit in contemporary society without putting yourself in danger of being arrested. But it is not enough to simply lay your staff on the congregation’s face. If your stage permits it, walk toward your audience when getting personal. I use various verbal devices, “Let me ask you a personal question?” “I say this with all affection, but...” “Friend, have you ever thought...?” *Ask questions as if you’re having a dialogue with one other person. Stay away from general and abstract questions!* Hit the people between the eyes with your application. Screw the truth into their foreheads. Don’t let truth hang six inches above their heads.

Make Applications Accessible

One of the things I regularly advise individuals I’m mentoring is *to put their cookies on a very low shelf*. Not everyone has a philosophy degree. Make it easy for people to connect with the truth. That doesn’t mean you are trite. It means you’ve thought hard enough about the truth to make it simple without being simplistic. Karl Barth once said, “I wouldn’t give anything for simplicity this side of complexity. But I would give the world for simplicity the other side of complexity.” I’m not interested in someone’s trite little formulas when I speak that they haven’t really thought through the problem. I’m not interested in someone’s religious talk when I sense that someone hasn’t really been through the fire or experienced trial. But when someone has experienced great pain, or been through some massive trial, one of the things I’ve learned as a result of this trial is that God is good, no matter what. If life treats me well, or life treats me badly, I’ve learned through this trial that God is good. It’s worth the world to me.

When I hear someone describe some great tragedy in their lives and they said one of the things God brought me to is the simple, humble place of kneeling before him and saying, “You are God and I am going to trust in you regardless.” It’s worth the world. The great apologists of our time are not people who communicate complex truths with complex words. *The great apologists are those who communicate complex truths simply and memorably.* It is absolutely essential that you apply what you are talking about. When a preacher uses the cop out, may the Holy Spirit apply this to our lives, it means I haven’t the foggiest idea how to bring this home.

Applications Should Equip People to do What You Are Calling For

Certainly, part of application is equipping people to do what you are telling them to do. I read a story about an individual who broke down in tears with her pastor and said, “Pastor, I’ve been coming to church for three decades and for three decades I have

been urged to witness to my neighbors. I've prayed about it and I really want to do it. I know I am a terrible witness, but pastor, no one has ever showed me how to witness."

Let me share with you a personal story that just happened to me very recently. I got together with a couple that was separated. There was enormous hostility from the wife toward the husband. She could barely look at the man. The husband had one of these typical self-righteous attitudes that men tend to have when they are driving their wives toward divorce. He just kept repeating over and over, "We certainly both have made a lot of mistakes. But I think its time we follow God's Word and allow Jesus to be at the center of our marriage." I've found there to be an enormous lack of humility as the common denominator in broken marriages. There is no self-reflection. There's no brokenness. There's no woe is me. And as a general rule, husbands want to move on and wives find themselves emotionally unable to move on.

Well, the way I handled this particular couple was to say to the man, "You know, you seem to be completely convinced already about God's will." He said, "That's right." I said, "Well, if it would be all right, I'm going to ask you to excuse yourself so that I can talk with your wife alone, who is not convinced." Well, he was cornered. He had to say, "yes," so he said, "OK." I talked with his wife and said to her, "What is it that you want?" She said, "I don't know." I said, "Do you have any vision at all for your life at this time?" She said, "Absolutely none beyond just finding a place to live and trying to survive." I said, "What do you think Christ wants for you at this time?" She said, "I haven't a clue." I said, "Well, may I suggest something?" She said, "That's fine. I don't have any answers." I said this,

"You know, the most tragic thing in the world is not the pain that you are currently going through. The most tragic thing in the world would be for you to go through all of this pain in your marriage and not have it produce anything good in your life. Pain is not the worst thing. Meaningless pain is the worst thing. Purposeless pain. Pain that doesn't produce anything at all. Do you know biblically, the main instrument that God uses to change us, to make us better, to make us more loving, to make us more patient, to make us more kinder, to make us more humble is pain.

May I suggest a vision for your life? How about in a year or two years you are a better person than you are right now. That you are more loving, kinder to people who are going through trials or difficulties, more patient, and that you are a good listener, more empathetic. And in contrast, wouldn't it be awful if in 5-10 years you turned out to be one of those really bitter persons whose spirit was shrunken and crippled and who could only talk about the terrible things that their husband did to them?" She said, "I want to be a better person. I want to be kinder." I said, "That's a worthy vision. Now you've got some vision. Let me ask you this. Do you have any idea what's keeping you from becoming a better person?" She said, "I don't know. I'm trying to get in touch with God, but I just feel completely disconnected." I said, "Do you know why you are disconnected?" She said, "I don't have a clue."

So we looked at the Bible together and we looked at Matthew 18, the parable of the unmerciful servant. I said, "May I put your name in this text?" And then we talked through the issue of forgiveness. We got to the end and she practically was in tears. Now this was a woman who had been going to counseling for two years and had spent I don't know how much money on her counselor. She said, "I don't know how to forgive him. I know I'm supposed to, but I just don't know how." So we talked through the mechanics of forgiveness. We talked about *how you do* what Jesus calls us to do in forgiving another person.

The issue is this: You have not applied God's Word unless you have assisted people to do what you are telling them to do. It is insufficient to merely raise issues, and teach doctrine, without giving people a practical vision for how they can *do* what God's Word is calling them to do.

The Importance of Equipping

- Our preaching must be committed to equipping others to do the ministry.
- The Bible is an equipping manual, giving practical advice in loving God, families, and neighbors.
- With this in mind, I apply a simple test to every sermon: On the basis of my communication, were people enabled to do what I said?
- It does little good telling people to "do it," if I have not taught them "how to do it."

15: Introductions and Conclusions

We need think through our introduction and our conclusion. In our introductions we want to build a *large front porch* inviting people to come up and have a conversation with us. One of the things I try to do with an introduction is to *begin with a hook*, something I think will *warm the people to the subject*, either by an introductory story or an introductory joke. And let me say one thing about the use of humor. Humor is helpful if you are funny. Humor is disastrous if you are corny and not funny. Now sometimes you can be so unfunny that your corniness will work in your favor, but most of us don't get to that place. We're simply just awful. And the audience groans. Don't use humor unless you are genuinely amusing because it will backfire. On the other hand, if you are amusing, humor can only work to your favor. But it's a dangerous thing and something that I think you need to ask friends who will tell you the truth concerning whether you are funny or not.

The purposes of the introduction are:

- To build a bridge to the hearer.
- To unpack bags, especially if your topic is controversial.
- To build your credibility. Answers the question: Why should I listen to you?
- To communicate your thesis.
- To build a seamless bridge to your title and main thesis.
- To build a front porch and invite people to come and sit with you and discuss the topic at hand.

Disastrous Ways to Start:

- Apologizing. "I haven't had much time to prepare." "I'm really nervous." "I don't feel so good."
- Reading the manuscript; no eye contact.
- Preaching right away – Exhorting right from the start
- Beginning with some heavy theological point

A good introduction should act like warm invitation into your thesis. Don't prove it to them in the first five minutes, prove that there is a need for your thesis, which you will spend the rest of the talk nailing down. The intro is like opening the door to your car and inviting the audience to come on a ride with you.

Conclusions: End With a Bang!

The conclusion purpose is to *close the deal*; get them to sign; draw the net; and call to a decision. In my conclusion, I try to end on a note of application. That is, I try to tell people how this message applies to their lives and what they need to do about it. In the conclusion you are aiming for a decision! Not just "good feelings," where people liked your sermon. You are shooting at their will: What are you going to do as a result of this message? This message was not simply information. We are being called to change.

16: Making Our Preaching More Interesting

There is no such thing as a biblical form that a sermon must take. Probably the only general rule is that *you ought not be predictable*. One of the saddest things about homiletics classes is that they force sermons into the three points and a poem sermon form. The literature in the Bible is so wonderfully varied; yet very often our preaching is horribly predictable. The worst thing in the world that someone could say about your preaching is that they knew what you were going to say before you said it. God loves variety. There are thousands of varieties of coral in the sea. There are tens of thousands of varieties of fish. Think about the different kinds of flowers there are. To offer people the same basic pattern to our messages would cause the reaction the Jews had to eating manna day after day. Its like the Israelites who wanted to go back to Egypt. You will create in people a hunger to go back to the world just because of the boring, predictable nature of our messages. There's an old story about how one person said, "Our preacher can preach twelve different sermons from one text." His friend countered, "Our preacher can take any text and preach the same sermon."

Think Through Your Preaching Plan

One way that I measure my own messages is *whether I'm offering a fresh word*. There are lots of ways to supply freshness to your preaching. One is to think through your overall preaching plan. Have you done seven topical series in a row? Why not switch to a book study? Are 80% of your messages being drawn from the New Testament or from the epistles? Why not move back to the Old Testament?

As I look at a year or two slice of my preaching calendar, I ask myself these questions: Where have I been teaching from recently? What have I neglected in the scriptures? What has my teaching method been? If it's a book study, I will want to move toward a topical, expository book study. If I've been excessively vertical, then for a while I want to be horizontal. Where have I lived in terms of the three worlds that you need to analyze, the world of *the Bible*, the world of *today*, and the world of *the church*? What specific areas have I not touched upon?

In increasing the creativity of your messages, consider preaching from books you've simply never addressed before. Some of my most popular series have been drawn from books that are typically neglected by preachers. For example, recently I preached through the Song of Songs, not as an allegory, of course, but as a collection of love poems. It has been immensely popular. Years ago I did a series titled *Major Lessons from the Minor Prophets*. I took five or six of the shortest Old Testament prophets and taught them in a series.

If you spend month after month attempting to cast vision for the church, our people will choke. There's only so much vision people can handle. And their lives do not revolve entirely around church concerns. They'll be forced to look elsewhere for practical teaching on handling the single life, their finances, parenting, and other life issues. The people will be entirely uninformed regarding how to think about issues like war, abortion,

issues of race and affirmative action, or appropriate roles for women in the family and the church.

Simply stepping away from your sermon series and looking at your preaching history for a one or two year slice will increase your creativity. Creativity is also required as you do weddings and funerals. One thing you can easily do is just put a file together of thoughts, stories, and various things that you would want to use in a wedding or a funeral. You can do the same thing for Christmas and Easter. Lots of times in my reading, I'll come across a story or a quote, or illustration and I'll think, "That would really fit for a Christmas or Easter message." Simply copy that page, write a subject at the top of the page, and put it into an alphabetized file.

Use A Variety Of Types Of Illustrations

In increasing creativity, use a variety of different kinds of illustrations. Personal illustrations are good, but people can overdose on the life of the pastor's family, or the most recent exploits of your dog, or your cute little children, or stories from history, or stories drawn from sports. Again, *you want to make the message unpredictable*. It ought not be possible for one of the members of your congregation to tune out for 5-10 minutes and say to themselves, "I know where this is going."

Vary Your Outlines and Sermon Structure

Sermon outlines can increase your creativity. Over against the three-point outline in which everything is blended, you might find that the text provides you with a structure. If you are preaching Luke 15, you can't do a whole lot better than following the structure of the text, which is lost and found. A creative way to outline a text is to view it from the perspectives of the various actors.

I don't know how many of you had the opportunity to read Henri Nouwen's book, *The Return of the Prodigal*. Nouwen weaves in a narrative about the life of Rembrandt, whose marvelous painting of the Prodigal is found in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. He weaves in the narrative of Rembrandt with the story of the Prodigal, told from the perspective of the three major participants – the lost Son, the Father, and the Elder Brother.

Creativity is crushed when you display a character in a text as if he or she was a cartoon. For example, in the story of the Prodigal, it is the easiest and most predictable thing in the world for pastors to portray the Elder Brother as if he is all bad, and as if there is no excuse for his behavior and his shriveled up narrow heart. That the Elder Brother is like the preacher written in those awful teen movies in which all the teenagers want to do is host a dance. But the self-appointed guardians of morality in the town engage in a witch-hunt against the local teen rock band.

If you paint characters in your message in cartoonish terms, through obvious tones, your preaching is boring. *Make the characters real*. If you are talking about the Elder Brother, why not flesh him out? Why not say, "*How many of you have a person in your family that has abused the grace of your parents or you repeatedly? I'm not going to*

ask for a show of hands, but how many of you have a brother or sister who has from the time you can remember gone off the rails and blamed others for their situation? They've made a series of bad decisions and yet blamed your mother and father for everything. Do you know anyone in your family who just keeps coming around for another handout? Who is working on their third failed marriage? Have you ever had a child who keeps lying to you? Who constantly has a double life? Who is ungrateful? Is the message of God to us that we always should be patsies, enablers? Is there a time for tough love? It's easy to kick the Elder Brother around, but is there anyone here who can't understand a desire to draw a line with someone?" Creativity is enhanced when we move away from caricaturing and talk about real characters that the audience can identify with.

Creativity is also enhanced when your sermon form varies. Do you always have three take-aways at the end? Is that the way the Bible is written, with three take-aways at the end of the text? Do you insist that our sermons always be upbeat and for fun? Is every text in the Bible always fun or upbeat? Do your sermons always have the same emotional tone? Do you always cry?

Move From Deductive To Inductive Approaches

Another way to increase creativity is to vary your approach from deductive to inductive. Lots of preachers have been trained to state a central thesis and then to prove the thesis through the course of the message. But why not let the thesis emerge. Don't tell people where you're going. Just take them by the hand and lead them to pull on different door handles until the lion jumps out at the end. By preaching inductively, we mean that we gather up individual facts and work toward coming up with a larger proposition.

Interrupt Series From Time to Time For Matters of Grave Importance

Creativity is enhanced by allowing your sermon series to be interrupted by messages on matters that have gripped the minds of your congregation. Situations like 9/11, political elections, crisis throughout the world and in our cities, are all opportunities for a break in a series.

Creativity is enhanced by reading great books and listening to great preaching

Don't just read theology, of course. Begin to explore areas of life that you haven't spent much time exploring. I personally love reading history and biographies. We need to balance three worlds: The world of the Bible, the world of our present culture, and the world of our church. We want our reading and study and reflection to be balanced on all three of these issues. (See Appendix A for some ideas)

17: The People: Speak to the Lost of all Kinds

Some people are seekers, they just seem to be born with a passionate interest in truth and in God. These folks are naturally idealistic. They have a spiritual bent to them. And there are folks in your church who have looked into various religions. Maybe they were or currently are involved in some New Age spirituality. I have talked with seekers who have made pilgrimages and trips to the Andes and to India seeking some sort of answer or spiritual enlightenment. I have talked with people who have spent a year in a monastery. I've talked with folks who have been in Buddhist monasteries and Trappist monasteries. They took philosophy classes. You have people who have been to every church meeting at your property since you built your building. They're waiting in the parking lot for the doors to be unlocked. There are people who are always looking, always searching, always reaching out. And God makes a promise in Jeremiah 29:13 to these people. Jeremiah the prophet says this: *"You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all of your heart. I will be found by you, says the Lord."* Keep looking for God, the true God, the one God. Look for him with all your heart and you will find him.

Some people come to know God by being connected to a credible person, a person that they respect. In our church we have seen that very often a person comes to know God when a trusted person leads them to Christ. That person often is a parent or a grandparent. Many of you came to know Christ through your parents or grandparents or through another close relative. Some of you have come to know Christ through your spouse or through a roommate or friend. Maybe the relationship is more distant. Maybe it was your pastor. But it is someone you respect. That person is there. God connects you up and he begins to open your eyes through another credible person.

Some people are in pain. I have seen God use pain very often to open the eyes of our heart to our need for him. God's Spirit often uses personal pain or failure over and over again. Personal brokenness is the vehicle. It is like the light of God shines through the broken pieces of our hearts. Now the brokenness that we experience could be the discovery that you have *AIDS* or some other sexually transmitted disease. Or you have *cancer*. The brokenness can spring from a *divorce or a separation*. Marital failure is often used by God to communicate to us our need for him. The pain could be the *result of an addiction* that's ruled your life. There are points of contact that connect with all kinds of people: Drugs, alcohol, sex or a major legal problem – a lawsuit, a criminal charge, a bankruptcy, family problems, jail, experiencing violence. Pain is one reason that the prodigal came home to his father.

Some people are prodigals, they have wandered away from their Father in heaven. They've been away from God for a long time and often God uses pain to bring us back. Pastors, you are regularly talking with people who are sick and tired of being sick and tired. And I have watched over the years, person after person come to know God in a real way as the result of having a problem that they could not solve on their own.

Some people are empty. They aren't in pain. They aren't necessarily seekers, but they are empty. And I have watched God's Spirit use deep emotional or spiritual emptiness—a feeling of dissatisfaction, a void that we experience in our life, especially the emptiness of success—to open our eyes to God. I say to the people I pastor, you know, unless you've been there, you can't explain to someone else how the emptiness of success can feel like an incredible ache in your soul. The ache of the soul is worse than any toothache. The ache of the soul is worse than any backache. It just continues and continues to gnaw away at you. Something is missing. Something is wrong. You're not happy. You should be happy. You're in this marriage and you should be happy. You have all the gadgets. You have a great job. You can go anywhere you want to go on vacation. You have all the sports equipment. You have this great car. You are in a relationship. But you are not happy. Underlying all of the stuff there is this question that keeps rising up inside. Is this all there is? Is this all that life is about? I can rattle off person after person who had their eyes opened to God by first experiencing the emptiness of success.

Some people come to know God through a divine encounter. Some people literally are encountered by God as the result of his direct intervention in ways that he makes himself unmistakably real. I know people who have been healed of life threatening illnesses and someone came in and prayed for them and BANG, the illness stopped. No explanation, just God. I know someone who just tossed up a question. It wasn't even a prayer, it was just a question they were thinking in their mind. What would it be like to have a relationship with God where you are asking that question and you turn on the radio and that person on the radio said, "You are wondering now what it would be like to have a relationship with God. Well, here is how you can have one." It just blew their mind.

I know folks who, by all rights, should be dead and had another chance to live because of God. I came to know Christ in a fellowship that was led by a man who was an alcoholic for many years. One night after a fight with his wife, feeling the after effects of another bout of drunkenness, this man decided that he was going to end his life by driving his car into an oncoming freight train. He sat in his car, in total black despair, and waited for a train to come and then drove his car right into the train. A split second, before the freight train hit his car, this man cried out, "Jesus, help!" His car was sheered in two, literally severed in half, and he walked out of the car with some scratches on his hands. That night he came to Christ and God used him to bring me to Christ. Unmistakable divine intervention!

18: Preaching and Evangelism

Creative Approaches to Evangelism

The four spiritual laws is not the only approach one needs to take in announcing the gospel. The Bible provides us with a kaleidoscope of *pictures and images*.

Images from a battlefield - Christ has gained a victory over sin, death and evil through his cross and resurrection. Through faith, believers may share in that victory and claim it as their own.

Images from a court of law – Through his obedience on the cross, Christ has obtained forgiveness and pardon for sinners. Those who are guilty can be justified in the sight of God. They are acquitted of punishment and given the status of being righteous before God.

Images from a family – As sinners we are alienated from God the Father. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. We who are afar from God can draw close to him through the death of Christ and can be adopted as His sons and daughters.

Images from a prison – Before coming to Christ, people are imprisoned (enslaved) by the oppressive forces of evil, sin, and the fear of death. They can be liberated by the cross of Jesus Christ. Just as Christ broke free from the prison of death, so can believers by faith break free from the bonds of sin and experience the liberty of the abundant life that Christ offers.

Images from a hospital – Those who are ill on account of sin can be made whole again through the wounded physician of Calvary. Through his cross and resurrection, Christ is able to bind up our wounds and heal us, restoring us to wholeness and spiritual health.

Depending upon your message, you can link one of the pictures or images that the New Testament provides with the message you are preaching. Each of these images relates in a different way to the human condition. It is important to remember that *the gospel doesn't merely relate to our condition of guilt*. It also relates to *the human predicament of alienation, imprisonment, failure, etc...* Be clear with people. Explain a person's situation: "You are stuck, You are broken, You are in prison, You are lonely." Then explain Christ's provision for a remedy. When we call people to decision, we must *give clear directions*. "In a few moments, I'm going to ask you to stand, or to raise your hand." Explain why you are asking for this kind of commitment.

Don't make people think too much. Explain the problem with clarity, the remedy with clarity, and the way to respond with clarity.

In calling for people to decide for Christ, it is important to remind the congregation that no decision is itself a decision. In other words, to reject an invitation to come to Christ is not neutral. Sheldon Van Auken, who came to faith through the friendly guidance of C.S. Lewis, stated:

“There is a gap between the probable and the proved. How was I going to cross it? If I were to stake my whole life on the risen Christ, I wanted proof. I wanted certainty. I wanted to see him eat a bit of fish. I wanted letters of fire across the sky. I got none of these. And I continued to hang about on the edge of the gap...it was a question of whether I was to accept him—or *reject*. My God! There was a gap *behind* me as well! Perhaps the leap to acceptance was a horrifying gamble, but of the leap to rejection? There might be no certainty that Christ was God—but, by God, there was no certainty that he was not. This was not to be borne. I could not reject Jesus. There was only one thing to do, since I had seen the gap behind me. I turned away from it, and flung myself over the gap toward Jesus.”

When preaching, it is very helpful to remind people that Christianity has been around for 2000 years. Its main rivals in the Western marketplace of ideas are recent inventions. Christianity has stood the test of time. If you had only to put money in the bank, would you put money in a bank that advertised itself as “Open since last Thursday. We hope to be here tomorrow!” Faithfully enduring for 20 centuries through wars, famine, plagues, terrorist attacks, persecution, etc.

Tennyson, in his *In Memoriam*, writes,

“Our little systems have their day;
They have their day, and cease to be:
They are but broken lights of Thee.
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they.

Worldviews that are regarded as a serious challenge to Christianity are here today and gone tomorrow. Just read church history.

When presenting the gospel, *it is useful to communicate that all belief systems rest on presuppositions.* Expose the presuppositions. Francis Schaeffer stated, “Let us remember that every person we speak to...has a set of presuppositions, whether he or she has analyzed them or not...*it is impossible* for any non-Christian individual or group *to be consistent to their system in logic or in practice*...a man may try to bury the tension and you may have to help him find it, but somewhere there is a point of inconsistency. He stands in a position which he cannot pursue to the end; and this is not just an intellectual concept of tension, it is wrapped up in what he is as a man.” Jean Paul Sartre stated that ethics were irrelevant and then he went ahead and signed the Algerian Manifesto to protest against continuing French occupation of Algeria.

Help People Change Their Minds

The Harvard Negotiation Project led by Robert Fisher, a professor of Law at Harvard, helps people resolve difficulties without losing face or compromising personal integrity. One reason that people stay in the position they do, is because *they are extremely reluctant to admit they are wrong about anything*. They may be saying in their minds: “I’ve been a Roman Catholic for 25 years now. That’s a long time. Everyone that I care about knows that I am a Roman Catholic. If I change my mind now, people will laugh at me. My parents will be mad. My personal reputation is tied up with me being a Roman Catholic. I’ll be disloyal to my entire past.”

Likewise, the same could be said if the person were Jewish, an atheist, a communist, a feminist, or anything else. Roger Fisher’s Harvard Negotiation Project rests on two simple principles:

- Separate the problem from the people.
- Make it easy for them to change their minds.

During preaching there are two approaches one can take. Link the person with the ideas they hold and attack them both. Have your preaching sound like the following: “I’m sorry, but I think you are totally wrong-headed in your viewpoints. I can’t take your New Age views seriously. And I don’t think you’ve really thought through the issues. I’m sure if you were to think about your New Age perspectives, you would find them as silly as I do. Let’s go through each of your absurd viewpoints and I will systematically shoot them down and prove to you that you are wrong.”

Of course, that is a caricature. But let’s consider the *Harvard Negotiation Approach*: “I totally understand how you feel about being Roman Catholic. I was raised in a Jewish family (nominal Christian; atheistic; secular; agnostic; etc...). I went through a very similar thought process as you did in trying to wrestle with my loyalty to my family, my background, and my heritage. Here are some of the reasons why I made the decision that I did and I’ve never regretted it.”

Remember, you are not just talking about issues in building an evangelistic, welcoming church. You are talking to people! You are speaking to specific situations that make a person feel the way they do. You are not simply debating ideas and philosophies. What you are attempting to do is help a person to save face. Christianity is not just an argument regarding why the person you are talking with is so stupid and you are right. Christianity is awesomely attractive and offers people not merely the opportunity to admit they are wrong, but a new sense of personal dignity. We are offering people something of value. We are not in the business of winning arguments. We are in the business of winning people.

It is extremely helpful to use yourself as an example of someone who has changed his or her mind. For example, “I used to think that Christianity was totally irrelevant. My main interest was in having a good time. But I remember when I needed to get up all my courage and change my mind. I finally came to a place of honesty where I realized

that all of my partying didn't really satisfy me. That the truth was I was still lonely. I didn't have deep relationships. Some of the people I considered my friends were not my friends. I'm so glad that I did change my mind."

The fact that you acknowledged that you felt the same way and that you faced the issues in your life and resolved them as a matter of courage, and that the outcome was positive, assists a person to do the same.

Issues that keep people from coming to Christ

Some people are kept from coming to Christ because they feel inadequate or guilty. The thought process goes something like this: "If God knew what I was really like, he wouldn't want anything to do with me. I've screwed up too badly. I'm too much of a mess." This can be dealt with very simply by sharing a few basic points with a person:

God already knows what you are like. There is no question of deceiving God. God is not surprised or shocked by your sin. God is not up in heaven saying, "O myself, I never knew that about you." The gospel is meant for sinners. Realizing that you are a sinner and admitting it is a precondition for receiving forgiveness. It is so refreshing to be honest. The gospel is for sinners. Jesus' blood offers real forgiveness only for real sin. Seeing yourself as a sinner doesn't disqualify you from God's grace, rather it qualifies you. The penalty of sin has been cancelled. Its power has been broken. If you come to Christ he will change you. You are not always going to be the way you are now.

It is very helpful to address the issue of suffering

This is a huge barrier for contemporary congregations. You can run through a traditional apologetic regarding suffering. We must remember that this issue is not an *abstract* issue. It is profoundly personal, so we must speak in personal terms when we address suffering.

God suffered in Christ. He knows what it is like to experience pain. God did not remain aloof, demanding that others suffer while he himself is free from pain in this world.

Here is an example I have used before on the topic of suffering:

Several years ago when our children were smaller we went down to Florida. We were vacationing and took a day trip to Key West. In the evening everyone stands along the shoreline of Key West to watch the sunset over the Gulf of Mexico. It is a regular carnival every night. We went to the shore to see the sun set and there must have been 10,000 out. There were musicians, jugglers, and a Christian preacher preaching. There was virtually no one standing around him, so I went over to support him while Marlene and the kids went to watch the juggler.

While the Christian preacher was preaching, a woman from England tried to interrupt him. She said, "I have a question."

The preacher said, “Just a minute. Wait until I am done.”

There were only five of us out there. She said, “I have a question.”

He said, “Just a minute, I am not done.” He was doing this little flannel graph thing and elaborately drawing out this picture that he wanted to show us.

Finally, she walked away and I heard the preacher say something in disgust about her about how she was insincere and had no real spiritual interest. I thought oh no, that wasn’t it at all. This woman was positively embarrassed herself to interrupt the preacher. She was so spiritually hungry.

And so I needed to go and find my kids, but I said to God, “God, if you want me to speak to that woman, you must let me meet her and I will speak to her.”

I went and got the kids and was walking through this enormous crowd. Like I said, there must have been 10,000 people there. I was walking and holding both kids by the hand. I turned the corner and I literally ran face to face into this woman. I felt God said, “Well, here is the answer to your prayer. Here she is. Speak to her.”

So I said to her, “You know, I was back there with that preacher and you were going to ask him a question.”

She just exploded in anger and upset at pastors and preachers and what hypocrites they are and what she thought of them. Of course, I am sitting there thinking yeah, that’s right, preachers are sure hypocrites. After she unloaded I said, “Listen, what was it that you were going to ask that preacher back there?”

She said, “What I was going to ask [her lip began to tremble] was if there is a God why did he let my 35-year old husband just die of cancer? If there is a God, why did he let my husband die of cancer?”

I looked at her and I said, “I don’t know why God let your husband die of cancer. But I know that God understands exactly how you feel.”

She got real red in the face and said, “How could God understand how I feel?”

I said, “Because God watched someone he loved die a very painful death also. God watched his Son be spit at and beaten, stripped and finally nailed to a cross. And he allowed that to happen to save you and me. God understands exactly how you feel because he knows what it is like to lose someone he loves.”

Ultimately, friends, we don’t know why something terrible happens to any individual in any particular circumstance. But we do know that God is not the author of evil. We do know that this is not all there is. That there is something better coming. We

do know that God understands and he is with us even when we can't feel his presence.

Suffering brings home to us the fact of our mortality. It reminds us of our frailty. As C.S. Lewis stated, "It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul." In short, it creates a climate in which our thoughts are gently directed towards God, who we might otherwise ignore. "God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts to us in our pain; it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Suffering is not pointless, but leads to glory. The resurrection allows the suffering of Christ to be seen in the perspective of eternity. One day God, himself, will wipe away even the memory of suffering and pain. We can endure suffering better if we know where we're going. This world isn't all there is. There is more, and we have good news to proclaim.

Use Contemporary Illustrations From Movies, TV, Books and Apply Them

Here is an example of using a brief clip from a recent movie: In the movie, *Signs*, Mel Gibson plays an Episcopal priest who has lost his faith as the result of his wife being killed in a horrible traffic accident. At one point in the movie, Mel Gibson is talking with his brother about faith and he said, "You know, there are two kinds of people in the world. One kind believes in the improbable good in their life. When an accident is narrowly avoided, when a healing occurs, when they get an unexpected windfall, one type of person sees the improbable good in their lives as evidence of a miracle."

He said, "There's another kind of person, who when good things happen and they avoid accidents and healings occur, see in that only as chance and luck. They don't believe in miracles at all." He said, "What kind of person are you? Are you a person of the first type, or a person of the second type?"

Here is an example from the writings of C.S. Lewis, where he discusses "Why does God delay in showing us his glory?"

But we can guess why He is delaying. He wants to give us the chance of joining his side freely. I do not suppose you and I would have thought much of a Frenchman who waited till the Allies were marching in to Germany and then announced he was on our side. God will invade. But I wonder whether people who ask God to interfere openly and directly in our world quite realize what it will be like when He does. When that happens, it is the end of the world. When the author walks on to the stage, the play is over. God is going to invade, all right: but what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else—something it never entered your head to conceive—comes crashing in; something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left? For this time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be

too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing: it will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realized it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last forever. We must take it or leave it.

Here is an example from David Wilcox, a singer / songwriter who penned these words that grasp the heart of suffering and finding God in the midst of pain and suffering.

You say you see no hope, you say you see no reason
We should dream that the world would ever change
You're saying love is foolish to believe
'Cause there'll always be some crazy with an Army or a Knife
To wake you from your day dream, put the fear back in your life...

Look, if someone wrote a play just to glorify
What's stronger than hate, would they not arrange the stage
To look as if the hero came too late he's almost in defeat
It's looking like the Evil side will win, so on the Edge
Of every seat, from the moment that the whole thing begins
It is...

Chorus:
Love who makes the mortar
And it's love who stacked these stones
And it's love who made the stage here
Although it looks like we're alone
In this scene set in shadows
Like the night is here to stay
There is evil cast around us
But it's love that wrote the play...
For in this darkness love can show the way

So now the stage is set. You feel you own heart beating
In your chest. This life's not over yet.
so we get up on our feet and do our best.
We play against the Fear.
We play against the reasons not to try
We're playing for the tears burning in the happy angel's eyes
For it's...

Chorus:
Love who makes the mortar
And it's love who stacked these stones
And it's love who made the stage here

Although it looks like we're alone
In this scene set in shadows
Like the night is here to stay
There is evil cast around us
But it's love that wrote the play...
For in this darkness love can show the way

The bottom line for addressing the issue of suffering is that we must address it in personal terms and help people find God in the midst of all kinds of suffering: death, disease, divorce, loneliness, physical pain, emotional pain, financial struggling, feelings of meaninglessness, job difficulties, ministry challenges, family struggles, marital challenges, etc...

We must speak to people regarding these issues and give them the hope that *is found* in Christ in each of these areas.

The issue of suffering presents each of us preachers with a rare opportunity of speaking a powerful word into another person's life. It is an issue that will always be a point of contact with people and will give us a connection point in our messages. As preachers, it also presents a challenge to us, in that we must be fully engaged in what God has called us to do. We must be engaged with this issue and all issues emotionally, biblically, intellectually, and philosophically. The task of preaching is a challenge and a delightful opportunity. Jonathan Edwards' Resolutions close with this final thought: #70 – *Let there be something of benevolence, in all that I speak.* May God give each of us a passion for His Word, for His people, and for proclaiming the grace and the truth that is found in Christ alone!

Appendix A: Helpful Resources for Preaching and Teaching

Word Study Books – New Testament

1. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (3 Volumes), edited by Colin Brown, (Zondervan). These three volumes do not require a knowledge of biblical languages. They are the most reliable word study dictionaries written from the evangelical perspective available in English. These are a must-buy.
2. *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, edited by Harris, Archer, and Waltke, (Moody Press). These two volumes are keyed to Strong's Exhaustive Concordance and therefore do not require a capacity to read or understand Hebrew. Also written from an evangelical perspective, they are a reliable guide to theological word studies for the Old Testament. Particularly helpful for a pastor or Christian leader who doesn't have the time or background for detailed technical study.
3. *The Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Fritz Rienecker, Cleon Rogers. This little book offers enormous practical assistance for the pastor who wants to take into consideration more technical grammatical considerations of a New Testament text.

Bible Encyclopedias and Dictionaries

1. *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. David W. Baker (IVP)
2. *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*, ed. Bill T. Arnold & H. G. M. Williamson (IVP)
3. *Dictionary of Jesus & the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green & Scot McKnight (IVP)
4. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid (IVP)
5. *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig Evans & Stanley Porter (IVP)
6. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III (IVP)
7. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (4 Volumes), edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Eerdmans). This is a four-volume gold mine of information, written from an evangelical perspective on subjects ranging from typical Bible dictionary subjects such as articles on every name of a person or place mentioned in the Bible. They also include the theological or ethical meaning of biblical terms. In addition, these four volumes have lengthy articles on subjects such as baptism and offer detailed viewpoints of baptism from the Baptist perspective, Lutheran perspective and Reformed perspectives. The volumes also take account of more recent archeological discoveries and biblical scholarship.

8. *The New Bible Dictionary*, edited by J.D. Douglas, et al., (Tyndale). This is the best of the one volume Bible dictionaries, written from an evangelical perspective. It contains extremely thoughtful and useful articles on theological subjects such as incarnation (very helpful for Christmas), the resurrection, reconciliation, etc. as well as names, places, and articles.

Commentary Series Recommendations:

Helpful full-scale commentaries:

- *Word Biblical Commentary*
A benchmark of conservative/critical scholarship, maybe a bit technical, but generally clear and thorough.
- *Interpretation, A Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*
Very creative and insightful, great for getting ideas for preaching
- *New International Commentary of the Old and New Testaments*
An excellent conservative critical commentary. Like *Word* it may run a little technical but is very insightful.
- *The New Interpreter's Bible*
This is an excellent and consistent commentary done in just 12 volumes.

Helpful lighter commentaries

- *The NIV Application Commentary*
Easily accessible and filled with applications to use in preaching.
- *Tom Wright's For Everyone Commentary Series*
Tom Wright is one of the premiere theologians today and this series is his attempts to communicate lofty ideas in a clear and easily understood way for the general reader.
- *The Bible Speaks Today* (IVP)
Edited by J. A. Motyer and John R. W. Stott, this is a quality series that is very readable and is just the right size for a quick but meaningful comment on text.
- *Tyndale Commentary*
Conservative, good scholars, but often too short.

Some great commentators to read:

Baldwin, Joyce	Fee, Gordon	Mays, James Luther
Bauckham, Richard	France, R.T.	Morris, Leon
Beasley-Murray, George	Goldingay, John	Oswalt, John
Brown, Raymond	Green, Joel	Peterson, Eugene
Bruce, F.F.	Guelich, Robert	Stott, John
Brueggemann, Walter	Hagner, Donald	Wenham, Gordon
Carson, D. A.	Hooker, Morna	Willemon, William
Craddock, Fred	Johnson, Luke Timothy	Williams, Don
Craigie, Peter	Kidner, Derek	Witherington, Ben
Dauids, Peter	Lloyd-Jones, Martin	Wright, N.T.
Dunn, James	Marshall, I. Howard	

New Testament Commentaries – The list includes more technical commentaries, which require at least the capacity to read Greek or Hebrew along with commentaries that do not require either a working knowledge of or capacity to read biblical languages.

1. Matthew

- a. D.A. Carson, *The Expositor's Commentary* (Zondervan) – Carson's Matthew commentary occupies over half of the three-volume in one (Matthew, Mark and Luke) volume in the Expositor's Bible Commentary Series. Carson is a very reliable New Testament scholar.
- b. Craig Keener, *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series* – This is a very user-friendly commentary written in a very relevant and contemporary fashion. Keener is thoroughly familiar with the New Testament world and builds bridges between the world of the New Testament and the world of today.
- c. Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans) – A more massive and technical commentary that also contains almost verbatim the content of Keener's InterVarsity Press volume. This is useful for those who want much more background and technical information. It does not require a working knowledge of Greek.
- d. Useful sermon series on the Sermon on the Mount:
 - Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies on the Sermon on the Mount* (Eerdmans)
 - Helmut Thielicke, *Life Can Begin Again* (Fortress Press)
 - John R. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (IVP) – Stott is a master at organizing material in a memorable fashion.

2. Mark

- a. William Lane, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Eerdmans). This is one of the best of the New International Commentary Series.

3. John

- a. Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Eerdmans). A classic! Morris is a master of communicating devotional warmth and sound, reliable biblical scholarship.
- b. Rodney Whitacre, *IVP New Testament Commentary*. Very user friendly.
- c. D.A. Carson, (Eerdmans). A wealth of information. Offers lots of exegetical options. Unfortunately weak on purpose of "Signs." Carson grinds an ax here.

4. Luke

- a. Joel Green, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Eerdmans).
- b. Marshall, I. H. *Commentary on Luke (NIGTC)*. G.R.: Eerdmans, 1978.

5. Acts

- a. F. F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Eerdmans). Bruce is one of the leading evangelical scholars of the second half of the 20th century. His Acts Commentary is one of his best.
- b. I. Howard Marshall, *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*. A nice, inexpensive and very useful paperback volume.
- c. Richard Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary Series* (Vol. 9). This series is very uneven. Longenecker's commentary contains a great deal of helpful information.

6. Romans

- a. James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary* (2 Volumes). James Dunn writes from a perspective that is extremely compatible with Vineyard's view of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. His work incorporates in more contemporary studies regarding the meaning of legalism, justification, and the arguments of Paul in Romans 9-11. A working knowledge of Greek (or at least the capacity to read Greek) would be extremely helpful here.

- b. John Stott, *Romans* (IVP) – Again, Stott’s great gift is his capacity to organize and synthesize material in a very simple and memorable fashion. Stott is weak when it comes to the experiential side of Christianity (Romans 5, 8). Stott offers the best of traditional conservative evangelical scholarship on Romans.

7. First Corinthians

- a. Gordon Fee, *The New International Commentary* (Eerdmans). This is probably the best of the entire New International Commentary Series and a model for what commentaries ought to be. Just about the only commentary you will need on First Corinthians.

8. Second Corinthians

- a. C.K. Barrett, *Black’s New Testament Commentary* (Hendrickson). Barrett has done a number of New Testament commentaries. This is my favorite. I highly recommend it as an accurate guide for II Corinthians. Barrett has no theological ax to grind.
- b. Ralph Martin, *Second Corinthians: The Word Biblical Commentary*. A technical and exhaustive commentary on II Corinthians. It requires the capacity to at least read New Testament Greek.
- c. Philip Hughes. Hughes writes from a Reformed Anglican perspective. There is a wealth of information in this commentary.

9. Galatians

- a. Richard Longenecker, *Word Biblical Commentary*. Longenecker adopts the South Galatians theory for the place of destination. He also works with contemporary understandings of legalism (E.P. Sanders) while offering them his own interpretation. This commentary requires a capacity to read New Testament Greek.

Non-Technical Application Style Commentaries

- 1. John R.W. Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today* (IVP).
- 2. Scott McKnight, *The NIV Application Commentaries* (Zondervan). McKnight’s commentary contains a lot of excellent preaching material.

10. Ephesians

- a. Andrew Lincoln, *The Word Commentary Series*. Lincoln disappointingly does not hold to Pauline authorship of the Book of Ephesians. Lincoln interacts with much contemporary scholarship. This requires the capacity to at least read Greek.
- b. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (IVP). Written in Stott's typical clear fashion from a conservative evangelical perspective.

11. Philippians

- a. Gerald Hawthorne, (*Word*). One of the best of the Word Commentary Series. It is a great combination of technical scholarship and devotional insight. It requires the capacity to at least read Greek.
- b. Alec Motyer, *The Bible Speaks Today* (IVP). The Bible Speaks Today Series is generally user-friendly and application filled. This is a good series and a good, useful commentary.

12. Colossians

- a. R.C. Lucas, *The Bible Speaks Today* (IVP). Written by a very conservative expositor. Somewhat anti-charismatic; some helpful practical application material here.

13. First and Second Thessalonians

- a. F.F. Bruce, (*Word*). Written in Bruce's clear style. Requires a reading knowledge of Greek.
- b. John. R.W. Stott, *The Gospel and the End of Time* (IVP). Again, Stott organizes the text in a very helpful way.

14. First and Second Timothy, Titus

- a. Gordon Fee, *The New International Biblical Commentary* (Hendrickson). A very helpful, brief paperback commentary. Fee takes an open supportive viewpoint of the ministry of women in the church.
- b. J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, Thornapple Commentaries (Baker). Kelly was a leading scholar of the last generation. This is a classic!

15. Hebrews

- a. William Lane, (*Word*). A very important addition to the massive number of commentaries on the book of Hebrews written by a leading New Testament scholar. It requires the capacity to read Greek.
- b. F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary Series* (Eerdmans). Another fine effort from F.F. Bruce and one of his best.
- c. Philip Hughes, (Eerdmans). Again, Hughes writes from a Reformed Anglican perspective. It is great in offering a Reformed perspective of Hebrews chapter 6.

16. James

- a. Ralph Martin, (*Word*). A more technical, helpful commentary. It requires the capacity to read Greek.
- b. Alec Motyer, *The Bible Speaks Today* (IVP). This whole series is useful. Motyers volume is one of the best.
- c. Peter Davids, *The New International Bible Commentary Series* (Hendrickson). This very brief paperback volume is written by a Vineyard scholar and is very helpful.

17. First Peter

- a. Peter Davids, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans). One of the best on First Peter. Davids is a leading New Testament scholar of the general epistles. He writes as a member of the Vineyard family.
- b. Edmond Hiebert, (Moody). A lot of useful material. Very conservative and non-technical.

18. First, Second and Third John

- a. F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, (Eerdmans). A very brief commentary by F.F. Bruce. Helpful.
- b. Robert Law, (Baker). An old extremely valuable commentary that organizes First John into subjects. A classic.

19. Revelation

- a. George Eldon Ladd, (Eerdmans). Written from a post-tribulational, pre-millennial viewpoint.

- b. Robert Mounce, *The New International Commentary Series* (Eerdmans). My favorite on the book of Revelation.

The Old Testament Background and Commentaries:

The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament, John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas. This is a very helpful little book that provides the cultural background for the books of the Old Testament.

1. Genesis

- a. Gordon Wenham, (2 Volumes) (*Word*). These are absolutely the best commentaries available in the English language on Genesis. More technical.
- b. David Atkinson, *The Message of Genesis 1-11, The Bible Speaks Today*.
- c. Joyce Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50*. Baldwin's commentary is particularly useful. She is a great exegete.
- d. Helmut Thielicke, *How the World Began*. This is an extremely insightful series of messages on Genesis 1-11 by one of Germany's foremost evangelical voices of the last generation.

2. Judges-Ruth

- a. David Jackman, (*Mastering the Old Testament*). A very practical, helpful guide to these books. Not technical.

3. Judges

- a. Michael Wilcock, *The Bible Speaks Today* (IVP). The volumes in this series are helpful.

4. Ruth

- a. David Atkinson, *The Bible Speaks Today* (IVP). A very good little volume.

5. 1 and 2 Samuel

- a. Joyce Baldwin, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentary* (IVP). Another useful, small commentary by Joyce Baldwin.
- b. Ralph Cline, *Word*. A more technical commentary. Helpful.
- c. A.A. Anderson. A good technical commentary.

6. Ezra, Nehemiah

- a. Raymond Brown, *The Bible Speaks Today* (IVP). An extremely useful commentary. Non-technical.
- b. Derek Kidner, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (IVP). Brief, but loaded with Kidner's great insights.
- c. John White, *Excellence in Leadership*, (IVP). John White wrote a very practical guide to Nehemiah loaded with preaching insights.
- d. H.G.M. Williamson, (*Word*). Technical. Helpful.

7. Psalms

- a. Don Williams, *Mastering the Old Testament* (*Word*). The very best two volumes on the Psalms. Written by Don Williams in a kingdom-centered, Vineyard-friendly manner.
- b. Derek Kidner (Two volumes). Extremely helpful, brief commentary.

8. Proverbs

- a. David Hubbard, *Mastering the Old Testament* (*Word*). Written by the former dean of Fuller Seminary. Excellent!

9. Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs

- a. David Hubbard, (*Word*). An extremely useful, non-technical commentary.
- b. Tom Gledhill, *The Message of Song of Songs*. Helpful and practical.
- c. Tremper Longman, III, *Song of Songs, The New International Commentary of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans). The very best commentary on Song of Songs in the English language. A little more technical.

10. Isaiah

- a. John Oswalt, (2 Volumes) *The New International Commentary of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans). No other commentaries are needed. Great cognizance of contemporary scholarship.

- b. E.J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, (3 Volumes) (Eerdmans). Written from a very conservative perspective. Helpful insights regarding key prophetic passages that are useful to the preacher.

11. Jeremiah

- a. Derek Kidner, *The Bible Speaks Today* (IVP). Another good effort by Kidner.
- b. Eugene Peterson, *Run With the Horses*. Wonderful insights into the book of Jeremiah arranged topically.

12. Daniel

- a. John Goldingay, (*Word*). More technical. Some decent insights.
- b. Tremper Longman, III, *The NIV Application Commentary*. I really like Tremper Longman. Very helpful.

13. The Minor Prophets

- a. Walter Kaiser, *Micah to Malachi, Mastering the Old Testament* Extremely useful commentary written by one of America's foremost Old Testament scholars.
- b. Frank Gaebelin, *Four Minor Prophets, Obediah, Jonah, Habakkuk, and Haggai* (Moody Press). Difficult to obtain, but worth the effort. Great for preaching. Non-technical.

Biblical and Historical Background

- *Old Testament Survey*, Lasor, Hubbard, & Bush
- *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Tremper Longman & Raymond Dillard
- *The Old Testament Documents – Are They Reliable & Relevant?*, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.
- *Understanding the Bible*, John Stott
- *The Unity of the Bible*, Daniel Fuller
- *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Carson, Moo, & Morris
- *The New Testament Documents – Are They Reliable?*, F.F. Bruce
- *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*, James S. Jeffers
- *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes*, Kenneth Bailey
- *The Challenge of Jesus*, N.T. Wright
- *Understanding The New Testament*, Howard Clark Kee

- *The New Testament Speaks*, Barker, Lane, & Michaels
- *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, Joachim Jeremias

Biblical Exegesis and Interpretation

- *How to Read the Bible For All It's Worth*, Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart
- *Old Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, Douglas Stuart
- *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, Gordon Fee

(All three of these books are very good at helping you think through “how much” exegesis do I need to do in sermon preparation. There are some very helpful “practicals” in Fee’s NT Exegesis book, called a “Short Guide for Sermon Exegesis.” These are three invaluable resources!)

Theological and Christian History Books

- *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem
- *The Mosaic of Christian Beliefs: Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity*, Roger Olson
- *Theology for the Community of God*, Stanley Grenz
- *Christian Theology*, Millard Erickson
- *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform*, Roger Olson
- *Turning Points*, Mark Noll
- *Theology of the New Testament*, George Ladd
- *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, George Ladd
- *The Story of Christianity*, Justo Gonzalez

Helpful Books on Preaching

- **Foundational – the Structure, the Thinking, and the Planning Behind Great Preaching**
 - *Biblical Preaching*, Haddon Robinson
 - *Between Two Worlds*, John Stott
 - *The Anatomy of Preaching*, David L. Larsen
 - *Preaching*, Fred Craddock
 - *A Guide to Biblical Preaching*, James W. Cox
 - *Teaching to Change Lives*, Howard Hendricks

- **Preaching in the Contemporary World**
 - Preaching to a Postmodern World, Graham Johnston
 - Preaching to a Shifting Culture, Scott Gibson
 - Surprising Insights from the Unchurched, Thom Rainer
- **Great Books on the Value of Preaching and the Values that should drive our Preaching**
 - The Supremacy of God in Preaching , John Piper
 - Lectures to My Students, Charles Haddon Spurgeon
 - Preaching and Preachers, D. Martin Lloyd-Jones
 - The Company of Preachers, Edited by Richard Lischer
 - Christ Centered Preaching, Bryan Chappell
 - Return of the Prodigal Son, Henry Nouwen
 - Love, Acceptance and Forgiveness, Jerry Cook
 - Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them, Thom Rainer
 - Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity, Eugene Peterson
 - Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work, Eugene Peterson
 - The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction, Eugene Peterson
 - *The Preaching Life*, Barbara Brown Taylor

Connecting With the Culture

(Helpful Websites, Books, Magazines, Journals to stay up on cultural transitions)

One of the things that you will want to do is read widely across the spectrum. Many of these materials will help you with illustrations, but they will also help you have a pulse on the actual world where you are preaching. As you are reading through articles and thinking through topics, you can envision a dialogue between the writer of a particular article and someone who is trying to bring God's Word into this particular area or issue.

- <http://www.nybooks.com> ~ The New York Review of Books, they have a journal that would be worth getting and a good website to gather information
- <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/books/index.html> - The New York Times Book Review
- <http://www.booksandculture.com> - Christianity Today publishes this journal, which is helpful and will help with insight into the culture and into the church at large
- <http://www.navpress.com/ctt/> - Current Thoughts and Trends: This site provides concise, timely, and accurate summaries of a breadth of content from more than 130 Christian and secular periodicals, journals, web publications, and books
- <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/> - The Wilson Quarterly - contains great book and article summaries from virtually every academic discipline
- <http://www.theatlantic.com/> - The Atlantic – a more eclectic magazine that has been around for 130 years!

- <http://www.wired.com/> - Wired Magazine – a classic *postmodern* magazine that will provide you with insightful and at times very interesting reading
- <http://www.firstthings.com/> - First Things – a journal surveying religion, culture, and public life. This is somewhat intellectual, but will keep you up to date on various topics
- <http://www.rollingstone.com/> - Rolling Stone Magazine – this will ensure that your material and your messages never get too dated! The December issue is a great summary of the year's pop culture
- <http://www.discerningreader.com/> - a store that reviews Christian books and provides the best up to date collection of books that are available from Christian authors
- <http://www.weeklystandard.com/> - The Weekly Standard – a somewhat conservative magazine that is published 48 times a year.
- <http://www.tnr.com/> - The New Republic – an eclectic magazine that provides you with thoughts and articles from multiple perspectives on various issues.
- <http://www.utne.com/> - Founded in 1984 by Eric Utne, UTNE MAGAZINE reprints the best articles from over 2,000 alternative media sources bringing you the latest ideas and trends emerging in our culture... Provocative writing from diverse perspectives... Insightful analysis of art and media... Down-to-earth news and resources you can use... In-depth coverage of compelling people and issues that affect your life... The best of the alternative media.
- <http://www.relevantmagazine.com> - an online magazine (and a print magazine) that is a “Christian” version of Rolling Stone. Somewhat “trendy,” but has some helpful material.

Helpful Preaching Resources (audio and other resources)

Many of these materials are helpful and will assist you in sermon preparation and give you insight into preaching. It is best to use discretion with any of these resources.

- <http://sermons.christiansunite.com/> - Download free audio sermons
- <http://www.biblegateway.com> - lots of Bible translations including the TNIV.
- <http://www.ccel.org> - Christian Classics Ethereal Library run by Calvin College has a massive amount of church history documents full-text online for free.
- <http://www.ntwrightpage.com> - a collection of N.T. Wrights sermons, articles, and lectures.
- <http://www.desiringgod.org/> - the website of pastor and teacher John Piper. This site has many audio messages and his manuscripts from 20+ years of preaching
- <http://www.beliefnet.com> - a multi-faith spirituality site with a Christianity section and very interesting interviews with celebrities about their beliefs and practices.
- <http://www.gospelcom.net/> - a massive website! You can get dozens of bible translations for free on this site.
- <http://www.preachingplus.com/> - many resources – articles, weblinks, and other helpful materials

- <http://www.sermoncentral.com/> - an abundance of sermons and articles; some are helpful and others are not
- <http://www.sermonaudio.com/> - thousands of audio messages online
- <http://www.mhbcmi.org/> - Mars Hill Fellowship in Grand Rapids, MI. Pastor Rob Bell has many of his audio teachings at this site
- <http://www.marshallchurch.org/> - Mars Hill Church in Seattle, WA. Hundreds of audio sermons and articles from this church
- <http://www.whchurch.org/> - Woodland Hills Church in Minneapolis, MN. Pastor and Author Greg Boyd and others have hundreds of audio messages at this site
- http://www.vineyardcolumbus.org - archived audio and manuscript sermons from 1994 to present of Rich Nathan indexed by date, title, series, and text.

How to Use the Internet for Research

- **ProQuest:** You can search full-text through hundreds of archived major newspapers like NYTimes and magazines like TIME through an online database called ProQuest, which is free through your local library. You just need a library card and then go onto the library website and click something like “electronic resources” and look for Proquest. You will need to enter your library card number for access and then you’re in, you have your new best friend as a researcher. Once you’re in ProQuest, click on “databases selected” and make sure that “ProQuest Research Library”, “ProQuest Newspapers”, and “ProQuest Religion” are all selected. Once your databases are chosen, click “continue” to go back to the main search page. Here are your options:
 - Basic Search: good for general searching, just remember to click “full text documents only.”
 - Advanced Search: You can choose from the drop down menu if you want to search the “citation and abstract” (article title and summary paragraph) or “citation and document text” (article title and full text of document) or “author”. These are really helpful limitations to put on a search.
 - Topic Search: recommends broad topics from your keyword.
 - Publication Search: if you know that the article your looking for was in the NYTimes or the New Yorker, you just search that.
 - **Tip:** Use ProQuest before you hunt down primary source research (on stats, trends, stories). Often you’ll need to wade through websites and reports looking for the info you need, but there is almost always a story that has been written by professional journalists that know how to research way better then you do and have already done the work on you topic and summarized it in an interesting way. For Example: if you’re looking for the how many hours a week the average American works, don’t go first to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics and wade through technical reports. Go to ProQuest and search a few keywords like “average” “American” “work” “hours” and see what comes up.
- **ATLASerials** (ATLAS) online – If you have a seminary library near you, then you can access ATLAS from a computer in the library for free. This is the American

Theological Library Association compilation of all theological journals that can be searched full-text by keywords. This is extremely helpful!

- **Google:** www.google.com Thank God for Google! You know a search engine is good when it's name becomes a verb (I googled you). This is basically the only search engine you will need...period. Checkout google news, news archive, and googlescholar. Tips on how to search google:
 - From Google click "Preferences" and choose either moderate or strict "safesearch" filtering, so that web pages containing explicit sexual content from appearing in search results. Then choose to display 50 results per page instead of the default 10. This makes searching much quicker.
 - Use quotation marks around a phrase that you want to be searched as a single unit, instead of each word being searched separately
 - Use as many words as you can to sharpen your search. Google allows 32 words within the search query.
 - Try different synonyms or different ways of saying a word or phrase. Searching is totally "hit or miss," you've got to have just the right key to unlock the puzzle but usually it is a simple key.
 - For a quick definition of something, enter "define:" before the word. For example, define: ice storm
 - Add the word 'quotes' after a famous person's name to bring up a bunch of quotation website links to their quotes. Also try adding a word or two if you are looking for a specific phrase. For example, you might try searching— Martin Luther King Jr. quotes "I have a dream"
 - From the main page, click "Advanced Search" to limit search parameters without having to know the search lingo.
 - Once you have chosen a Google result and opened a webpage that contains your word, use the "Find" function on your web browser to locate where your word is on the page. In Internet Explorer, either type "CTRL+F" or click on "edit" at the top of the screen and choose "Find on this page" from the drop down menu. Then type in your word and hit "find". Your word will be highlighted on the page.
 - When you've found something that you want to print, always use the print button within the webpage if one is provided, instead of using the print button in your web browser. This will open a new window formatted for printing and then you can print through your browser.
- **Christianity Today Archives** - <http://www.christianitytoday.com> & <http://www.ctlibrary.com> If you have a print subscription to Christianity Today, you can access their full archives of articles that are both searchable and indexed topically (which is really helpful). This is available at ctlibrary.com. At the main site, there is a search feature but it only covers recent articles and is difficult to use. If you don't have a CT membership, I suggest googling your keyword followed by Christianity Today. This is a much smoother way to search CT's website than there internal search bar.

- **Wikipedia:** www.wikipedia.org This is a great first stop in researching something like a current or historical event or a person. It is a free encyclopedia that has nothing to do with wicca witchcraft. It is a huge, up-to-date, well-designed, and hip resource of anything you ever wanted to know about everything. The problem is that everyone can edit it so it can be wrong, really wrong. Never trust it totally and always fact check against published sources. That being said, it is an invaluable resource for orienting yourself toward whatever you are looking for.
- For Polls and Statistics:
 - www.barna.org (Christian stats)
 - www.census.gov (see particularly American FactFinder)
 - www.pewresearch.org

Appendix B: Two Manuscripts from Previous Messages

1. Christ the Revolutionary ~ *John – The Jesus I Never Knew Series*. March 14-15, 2003, John 2
2. Where is God When I'm Discontented? ~ *Where Is God When Life Is Hard Series*. August 14-15, 2004, Philippians 4:10-13

Christ the Revolutionary

Rich Nathan

March 15-16, 2003

John: The Jesus I Never Knew Series

John 2

The world right now seems to be in a season of upheaval. There are hot spots everywhere you look – in Iraq, North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela. You know, I was thinking about a much brighter season of upheaval that took place less than 14 years ago. It was November 11 and 12, when the Berlin Wall came crashing down. It is really important for us as the world goes through turmoil to draw some lessons from history. Powers that seemed absolutely invincible suddenly collapsed. Powers that oppressed, that showed utter disregard for human life, powers that rolled over people and appeared to be expanding like juggernauts suddenly vanished from the face of the earth.

I want to read to you from the diary of a Spaniard regarding what it was like to be in East Germany on the night that the Berlin Wall fell. Here's what he writes:

“On Saturday morning, the 11th of November, I heard on the radio that East Germany was collapsing. At the spur of the moment, I suggested to Karen, my Danish wife, and two Danish friends that we should go to Berlin. We talked about what one would take to a revolution. We settled on a dozen boiled eggs, a thermos pot of coffee, extra warm clothes, sleeping bags, and a battery powered radio. The four of us packed into my 25-year old VW Beetle and we drove off.

We got to the border of East Germany and on both sides the guard towers were empty. The East German border had always been a very serious place. Armed guards used to keep you in your car watching for attempts of escape. Tonight, it was an entirely different country. Large signs told us that we needed sets of car documents. The East German guard asked if we had documents. I handed him my Danish cat's vaccination documents in Danish. He waved us through.

We met people from Belgium, France, Sweden, Spain, and England. They had all left their homes and come to see the wall being torn down. Germans were drunk with joy. Everybody spoke in all sorts of languages and half-languages. French spoke German; Spaniards spoke French; everyone spoke a bit of German. We arrived in Berlin at about 4:30 a.m. and walked to the Potsdam Plats. From the east side we could hear the sound of heavy machines. With a giant drill they were punching holes in the wall. Every time a drill poked through everyone cheered. There were banks of lights that would come on. People shot off fireworks and emergency flares and rescue rockets. Many were using hammers to chip away the wall. There were countless holes.

At one point a crowd of East German soldiers looked through a narrow hole. We reached through and shook hands. They couldn't see the crowd and asked what was going on. We described the scene for them. Hundreds of thousands of people were walking around the plaza. Thousands of Champaign bottles littered the streets. Everything was open – restaurants, bars, and discos. Everything was out of control. Police on horses watched. There was nothing they could do. The crowds swelled. People were blowing long alpine horns, which made a huge noise. There were fireworks, kites, flags, dogs, and children. The wall was breaking down.

Finally, they brought in cranes and lifted huge slabs aside. East and West German police traded caps. To get a better view, hundreds of people were climbing onto shops on the West German side. People helped each other up on top of walls to see.

Then the final slab was moved away. A stream of East Germans poured through. Looking around I saw an indescribable joy on people's faces. It was the end of the government telling people what not to do. It was the end of the wall. It was the end of the war. It was the end of the East. It was the end of communism.

I stood with several East German guards. They had their rifles slung over their shoulders. I asked them if they had bullets in those things. They grinned and said, "No." From some houses someone had set up loudspeakers and they were playing Beethoven's 9th symphony, "The Ode to Joy." All people became brothers. There were no more governments – no East nor West. The police and the armies were helpless. The soldiers were overwhelmed by the events. They were part of the crowd. Their uniforms meant nothing. The wall was down."

Today I'm going to continue in a series that I started from the book of John, a series that I've entitled "The Jesus I Never Knew." And we are going to be reading about a revolution that began in an almost insignificant way in a backwater community in Israel in the first century A.D. But this revolution had implications that were bigger for the world than the fall of the Berlin Wall. I've called today's talk, "Christ the Revolutionary." Let's pray.

Before we look at John 2 in depth, I'd like to offer you a broader outline for the gospel of John. We have John 1, which is a prologue to the rest of the book. And we might say that John 1:14 announces the key theme of the book. Let me read it to you.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory; the glory of the one and only who came from the Father full of grace and truth.

The book of John is an announcement that the glory of God has been revealed through the God-Man Jesus Christ. And if you were to outline the gospel of John, you might say that from John 2 – 12 Jesus reveals the glory of God through signs. And from John 13 – 20 Jesus reveals the glory of God through suffering. There is a revelation of God's glory through signs and the revelation of God's glory through suffering.

Now there are different ways to break down the material in John 2-4. But I believe that this entire portion can be summarized by the revolutionary statement written by the apostle Paul in 2 Cor. 5:17.

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone; the new has come.

The old has gone, the new has come. Christ reveals the glory of God in a revolutionary way by overthrowing the old order and replacing it with something entirely new. We are going to see in chapter 2 that the old Jewish purification rituals are replaced by the new wine of the kingdom, and the old temple is replaced by the new temple of Christ's risen body. In chapter 3, our old way of life is replaced by the new birth and the new creation, and in chapter 4, the old water from Jacob's well is replaced by the new Living Water of the Spirit. The old worship in Jerusalem and Samaria is replaced by new worship in spirit and truth.

There is something utterly revolutionary about Christ's coming into the world. The old has gone. The new has come.

And so we read in chapter 2:1 – *On the third day a wedding took place in Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." "Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied, "My time has not yet come."*

Let me set the scene for you. Weddings were a major social occasion in ancient Israel as they are today in much of the world. Parents back then, as in much of the world today, would save money for decades to throw an appropriate wedding. They would incur major debt. Friends in Central Asia tell me that even poor families will invite 400-500 guests to a massive feast. Some of the weddings in ancient Israel would last for a week. They would be announced well in advance and the entire village would be invited. There would be a torch-lit ceremony in which the groom and his wedding party would

march to the bride's house and bring the bride and her guests to the groom's house, where the wedding would take place.

Suffice it to say, because of the importance of weddings in ancient Israel, running out of food and running out of wine was in this shame-based culture a major social embarrassment. So Jesus' mother makes a very reasonable request to her son to do something because this couple is about to be humiliated.

We read in v. 3, *When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."*

Now interpreters for nearly 2000 years have tried to soften the impact of Jesus' statement. He literally says, "Woman, what do I have in common with you?" or "What do I have to do with you?" The NIV softens it to "Dear woman..." There's no "dear" in the Greek. It is just "woman." Some translators say, "Lady." The only time I've ever heard "Lady" used as a direct address in contemporary culture is in New York where you will hear a store clerk say, "Hey Lady, are you going to buy something, or are you just going to waste my time?"

I don't think Jesus' response is rude, but it is sharp. And we ought not to diminish the sharpness of his response to his mother. "Woman, what do I have to do with you?" What is going on here is that Jesus the Revolutionary is asserting his independence. He is saying, "I'll no longer function as your obedient son. My agenda, what I am going to do, is dictated by my Father in heaven."

Do you know what happens when Jesus comes on the scene? He sets the agenda. We may not approach Jesus Christ with a set of demands. "Listen, Jesus, you've just got to do this." "You have to." "You must." It is unbelievably frustrating for us human beings to encounter the sharp rebuke of Jesus, the same sharp rebuke that he gave to his mother, "Listen, I don't have to do anything. You do not control me."

We try a million things, a million techniques to get Jesus to do what we want him to do. That's why books that tell you how to get what you want from God are unbelievably popular. People scooped up the Prayer of Jabez by the millions because they thought they had finally discovered the formula for us getting from Christ what we want.

Over the ages there have been all kinds of formulas. Some people have said, "Well, go to Mary, Jesus' mother. Jesus always listens to his mother." No he doesn't. Read John 2:4. "I am free from your demands, mother."

People said, "Go to the saints. He'll listen to the saints before he'll listen to you." Some people today say that you need to banish from your thoughts all thoughts of doubt, just think positively when you pray. Just say over and over again, "I know that you are going to give me what I'm asking for" or "if I fast for a day, then I'll get what I'm looking for from Jesus" or "if I fast for 2 to 3 days, then he'll give me what I'm looking for because it will show how serious I am."

Like Mary, the need is so obvious to us. “Jesus, this couple needs wine.” In our case, we say, “Jesus, we need a healing. We need a job. We need a spouse. We need this person’s heart to change. We need a rebellious child to turn around, to repent. It doesn’t make any sense, Jesus, to allow this situation to continue as it is. Isn’t it obvious to you that chronic pain doesn’t make any sense? It hurts. It doesn’t make any sense for me to have a sick child and not have them get well. It doesn’t make any sense for me to be unemployed when I want to work.”

Listen, prayer about any need is never inappropriate. We may always pray. What we may not do is presume that because of our special relationship with Jesus Christ, he must do what we’re asking. There was no special place reserved for his own mother. There is no special status reserved for you or me because we are children of God and we’ve served Jesus so faithfully for 2-5-20 years. Some people come to Christ and presume to hand him a bill.

“Listen, I’ve been serving you faithfully. You’re the one who called me to this particular task. Now you must come through for me.”

And Jesus sharply responds to that kind of presumption as he did with his mother, “Listen, woman, [listen, man] you have no special claim on me. I set the agenda, not you.”

Do you know, friends, that the freedom of God distinguishes the true God from all of the idols in the world. We read in Psalm 115:

Why do the nations say, “Where is their God?” Our God is in heaven. He does whatever pleases him. But their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men.

Our God is in heaven. He does whatever he pleases. With an idol, you can move them around and manipulate them. That’s why people like idols so much. Idols of work, money, sex, drugs, and alcohol – we can demand from our idols that they give us what we are seeking, and to some degree they do. But we can’t demand of Christ that he meet our need. In Christ’s loving freedom, he determines whether he will answer our prayers. He is the agenda-setter.

And in Christ’s loving freedom, he determines when he’ll answer our prayers. We read in v. 4, *My time has not yet come*. Literally, “My hour has not yet come.” He sets the time of his answers. We’ll tackle the deeper meaning of Jesus’ answer in just a moment. But on a surface level, Jesus is communicating his freedom to delay an answer to prayer.

And you know we always have to remember that when we don’t get an immediate answer to prayer, it doesn’t mean that we’ll never get an answer. Christ said, “My hour has not yet come.” You can underline those words, “not yet.” Christ’s “not yet’s” do not mean not ever. Often the Lord says to me and you, “Wait, it’s not my time for

answering. It's not my hour. Wait. Not yet." He determines whether he's going to answer, and he determines when he's going to answer.

We are so terrible at waiting. I think Americans are absolutely the worst people in history at being told "not yet." How many times have you complained about your computer? I can't believe how slow this computer is. We're downloading a massive file that is being sent to us from Germany and it takes 10 seconds to download. I mean we're sitting at our desks, not moving a muscle other than the muscle that controls our pointer finger. We don't have to go to a library. We don't have to fly to some foreign archive. All we need to do is click the mouse and in 10 seconds we obtain this massive file. And we say, "This is outrageous. I've just got to get a new computer."

Heaven forbid if someone in front of us at a traffic light glances down and doesn't gun the engine one nano-second after the light changes. We mutter under our breath wondering whether we should lay on our horns. Or if someone in the grocery line can't find their credit card or can't figure out how to use the automatic check out machine and starts fussing with their checkbooks. Some of us in situations like that need to take another blood pressure pill.

And it is particularly difficult for us to wait when something is close to our hearts. When we are hearing a "not yet" about one of our children who is doing poorly. Or we are hearing a "not yet" about our desire to be married. Or we are hearing from Jesus a "not yet" about a loved one's salvation, or a "not yet" about a healing or a major change in our marriages.

Listen to me, this is important. There are two main ways that Jesus Christ matures the faith of his followers – two main ways. One of them is to allow us to experience pain and the other is to make us wait. Pain and waiting, these are the two big blades on God's lathe. You know, God takes you and me and he sticks us on the lathe and like a table leg that's turning, God cuts away our independence, our pride, our presumption regarding how life ought to go for us; two big blades, pain and waiting.

Christ says, "I'm in control, not you. I set the agenda. I set the time." So it is "Wait, Abraham. Wait decades for the son I promised you." "Wait Rachel. Wait years to get pregnant." "Wait Moses. Wait 40 years for my calling of you in the desert." "Wait Israelites. Wait in Egypt as slaves for centuries." "Wait Simeon." "Wait Anna. Wait until you are old and about to die before I reveal Messiah to you." "Wait world. Wait millennia for Messiah to return and set everything right." "Wait for justice. Wait for judgment. Wait for the abuser to be dealt with. Wait for the liars, the manipulators, the tyrants and the dictators to be taken down."

Friend, in what you're going through right now, are you able to wait for God's answer? Will you say with me, "Lord, you know what's best for me. You know what's best for this person I'm praying for. You know what's best for your kingdom. Help me to accept your timing. Help me to receive your 'not yet' in faith."

Well, Mary gets the message. And her response is the classic response of the humble follower of Jesus. V. 5, *His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."* I get it. I'm not in control of the universe. Jesus is. Our job is not to order Christ around. Our job is to do whatever he tells us to do. Instead of trying to set the agenda for Jesus, to set the time when he must give me what I'm asking, I see now that I must just submit to his timing.

So Mary goes back into the role of disciple that she showed from the beginning. When the angel of the Lord came to Mary 30 years before and told her as a young teenager that she had been chosen to bring forth Messiah, Mary just lifted her hands in surrender and said, "May it be done to me, Lord, according to your will."

Whatever you are wrestling with Jesus about, why not say today, "OK. I'm going to stop fighting you. I'm going to stop trying to order the universe." I wonder how many of you simply need to say to Christ today, "All right. I give." God gives grace to the humble. He may not give you what you are asking for. But he'll give grace to the humble. God blesses the poor in spirit.

So, look at what Jesus does. We read in v. 6, *Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.* Observant Jews at that time and today ritually pour water over their hands before eating not only to clean their hands, but as a sign of ritual clean-ness before God.

Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water. So they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so and the master of the banquet tasted the water than had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, although the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink. But you've saved the best until now."

Jesus turns the water into wine; and the wine is of such high quality that the master of the banquet puts his arm around the bridegroom and says, "You know, normally people serve the best wine first. And when folks have dulled their powers, and they are a bit loopy, that's when we trot out the big 5-gallon jugs of Gallo or Manischewitz, or Boone Farm Apple Apricot wine. But you, bridegroom, saved the best until now."

In so many situations in our lives, Christ the Revolutionary, answers our requests by surpassing even our wildest expectations. Have you ever had Jesus intervene in your life in a way that was so much better than you ever could have asked or thought, or imagined in your wildest dreams? You are praying and praying and praying and Christ is saying, "Not yet, not yet, not yet." And you fear in your heart that he doesn't care. That he's not going to do anything. That he's not going to change the situation. And then the answer comes, and it is so much better than you could have planned.

Here is an extravagant amount of grace. Fill the jars to the brim. It's more abundant grace. It's more quality grace. It's free grace.

I remember when I quit my job as a professor at OSU to become this church's first senior pastor. At the time, our church was about 150 adults. How many of you were part of the church when I first became the senior pastor and we became a Vineyard? We were meeting in one service in a little church building south of Morse Road. We had one men's urinal. And I remember when I came in, I prayed and I prayed and I kept asking the Lord, "Grow us," and the biggest number I could think of was, "Lord, grow us to 2000 people by the year 2000." That was the largest church I could conceive of. Now, we have 6000 folks meeting here every weekend in an entirely different building. And we've started 14 to 15 different churches. We've given away hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people. We have ministries that we never dreamed of back 16 years ago – ministries to virtually every correctional facility around Central Ohio, a wonderful ministry to the homeless, a food pantry, a free medical clinic. We've got dental chairs in there now. We're talking about offering free counseling at our medical clinic. We have a wonderful ministry to people who have AIDS or who are HIV-positive.

Has Christ ever exceeded your expectations in a way that was utterly revolutionary for you? In your marriage? In saving someone? In transforming a loved one's life? Has he ever intervened in a way that you said, "I asked you for a change, but I never knew how extensive the change was going to be."

One thing that I love about Jesus here and really throughout the gospels, is that he is different than any revolutionary that I've ever heard of in the history of the world, because Jesus continually pays attention to the insignificant. Here he saves a couple from social embarrassment on their wedding day; he intervenes on behalf of an insignificant couple who are living in a terribly insignificant city, Cana. They are dealing with a rather insignificant problem, a problem insignificant to anyone but them, but Jesus pays attention to them.

You see, regarding every other revolutionary that you can think of, revolutionaries in general are completely consumed by their big plans for changing the world. And there is no room on their radar screen for one insignificant individual. They are caught up with a great vision for the workers, the poor, and the lost. And along the way in accomplishing this great vision, if a few people, or a few million people get stepped on, so be it. That's the price you pay. As Joseph Stalin said, "You can't make an omelet unless you break a few eggs."

Jesus is entirely different. Jesus continually in the gospels pays attention to the great as well as to the insignificant.

I saw this years ago when I was meditating upon Jesus' death on the cross. Here's Christ involved in the greatest accomplishment in history, the salvation of the world. Here's Christ hanging on the cross and defeating Satan, defeating death, appeasing God's wrath, winning forgiveness, offering eternal life. And yet, while he's hanging

there achieving the salvation of the world, he pays attention to little details like his mother's future care or a dying thief's need for hope.

Friend, do you realize that when you approach Jesus Christ, you are talking with someone who is not only caught up with the great events of the world – Iraq, global terrorism, the UN, the president's decisions, world missions, but someone who also pays attention to the little stuff, the everyday problems of our lives – your back problems, your bills, your anxiety over the safety of your son in the military, your being upset about someone's slander to your reputation, your need for a new car or new refrigerator. Never let anyone, never let any lie convince you that you or your problems are too insignificant, too mundane for Christ or that in the world where there are so many bad things going on, how dare you bring your little stuff to Jesus. In a world of war, Jesus still cares about children and single people, mommies and daddies, and grandmas and grandpas.

Well, the scene shifts and we read, *After this he went to Capernaum with his mother and brothers and his disciples. There they stayed for a few days* In the gospels, Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, seems to be the home base for Jesus. Perhaps his family moved there from Nazareth. But we read, *When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves, he said, "Get these out of here. How dare you turn my Father's house into a market." His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."*

There is significant scholarly debate about whether John has taken an incident from the end of Jesus' ministry, the cleansing of the temple, and just chose to reorder it at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Or if instead, there are two temple cleansings. Now, I don't think that there is a way for us to conclusively resolve this. But I think the stronger argument is that there was likely two temple cleansings – one at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and one at the end. The early temple cleansing didn't result in a conspiracy by the authorities to have Jesus arrested or killed, there was a very different reaction. John orders his gospel around 3-4 Passovers over the 3-year period of Jesus' ministry.

The Passover was a pilgrim festival in which Jews from all over the world would come to the temple. And because they came from a long distance, they didn't come with their cattle or with their sheep, they had to purchase an animal for offering. And they were also required to give coinage of a certain type to the temple. So the purchase of cattle, the changing of money was being done out in the court where the Gentiles used to pray. And Jesus angered by all of the commotion that is going on in the temple courts, a commotion that keeps people from being able to worship God and pray to God, begins to turn over the tables of the money exchangers, and starts driving out the cattle and merchants from the temple courts.

Now, this scene is very different than the nice little domestic theme that we read in the first half of John 2, this pleasant little wedding. And we say, "Isn't it nice of Jesus to bless weddings." Now Jesus is flipping tables over and he's formed a whip probably not made out of leather, but maybe bull rushes, and he's swinging this thing around and the tables are overturning, and money is flying, and cattle are running. It reminds me of that soda commercial where you see one of these old English monasteries and they are singing Gregorian chants and across the hill there's this castle and these guys there are playing punk rock. They have some sort of rave going.

The scene shifts so radically. What we find in Christ is a great mess-maker, a great unsettler. He's the opposite of the perfect little English gentleman with perfect manners.

Do you ever think about Jesus Christ being the great mess-maker? Christ is a revolutionary. He is a mess-maker. Do not follow Jesus Christ if you want your life to be neat, tidy and under your control. "Well, first I'm going to go to college, then I'm going to go to grad school, then I'm going to get a job; I'm going to buy a house, then buy a bigger house and save this money every week for retirement; then I'm going to retire in Florida and die, and along the way I'll also have Jesus, so I'll have a very nice comfortable little existence and have Jesus too."

Jesus absolutely turns things on their head. If you follow Christ, you must be prepared for him to turn you upside down, like he turned those tables upside down.

Now, I told you when we started this series that we're going to be talking about the Jesus we never knew. And there are things about Jesus Christ that American Christians absolutely deny. See, I say this with all affection but I believe that the average American goes to church looking for it to be a shock absorber for life. Here's the attitude. "I know that life can be difficult, there are lots of bumps along the way, here are difficulties in marriage. My child is sick; my child is rebelling. I might go through a divorce; I might discover that I have cancer. So I need something in my life to cushion the shocks. So I'll go to church and what I'll ask from the church and from Christ is for the church and Christ to be a giant pillow on my bottom so that when I fall it doesn't hurt so much. But do not suggest to me that you are going to change my plans or turn my life upside down, or that I need to trade in my old agenda for Christ's agenda. I'm not signing up for that. I just want a pillow for my bottom."

But friend, if you come to the real Jesus Christ, you must be prepared for him to mess up your plans and mess up your life. Let me state it this way. It is only partially true that everything in life goes easier with Christ. It is true that it is so much better to raise kids with Christ than without Christ, you have a guidance system, you have some absolutes, you have some direction for child raising. It is absolutely the case that it is much easier to have Christ in the center of your marriage than to try to go it alone. It is absolutely the case that if you are single, it is much better to have Christ guiding your decisions about relationships than to try to figure out the future by yourself. It is true that with Christ you don't have to keep banging your head into a wall. You don't have to live life as a slave to your addictions.

But as I said, it's only partially true that life is easier with Christ. Jesus himself said,

Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow is the road that leads to life and only a few find it.

In many ways, life is harder with Christ. The Christian life is like being a salmon; you are swimming upstream and the whole current is against you. It's hard to be holy, it's hard to pray and not worry, and it's hard to raise kids who love Christ in this culture. It's hard to have a life-long marriage and not bag it. It's hard to keep believing when you are disappointed. It's hard to extend yourself to someone you find it difficult to like. It's hard to forgive someone who has repeatedly hurt you.

It's easy to write people off. It's easy to be self-protective and self-indulgent, and self-promoting. People say, "I accepted Christ and I got all of this opposition. I family is upset. My friends are upset. My spouse is upset." Jesus is the supreme mess-maker. That's what you are coming to when you come to Christ, to someone who is going to mess up your life. You will regularly hear Christians say, "I wanted to go on vacation and lie on a beach. But because of Christ, I'm spending two weeks in some miserable community in Mexico helping to build an orphanage at my own expense and I just love it."

Or, "I was planning to live in the suburbs. But Christ made a mess of my life and now my plans have changed and I'm going to live in the inner city and reach out to kids of single mothers."

Or "I was planning to spend Sunday afternoon sitting on my backside watching TV, but because of Christ I spend Sunday afternoons visiting nursing homes."

How many folks have lost jobs because of Jesus? Changed careers because of Jesus? Lost friends because of Jesus? Had problems with their parents because of Jesus? Gone to jail because of Jesus? Altered marriage plans because of Jesus? Jesus makes a mess of everything. Soldiers have refused to fight; criminals have turned themselves in; people have been martyred.

Let's make this personal. Has Jesus messed up your life and turned your plans on your head? Have you come to Christ looking for a shock absorber? Or have you come to Christ the revolutionary who calls you to trade in your own little self-protective agenda for your life and how your life is supposed to go for his huge risk-taking plans for your life. If you want a nice, unruffled life, where you are just paddling along on a little duck pond somewhere, where everything is easy, everything is smooth, do not give your life to Christ.

But if you want to experience life to the fullest, where you get out in the whitewater, where you are not in control – come to Jesus. Listen, we really have no choices regarding messes. Without Jesus, we make a mess. Jesus makes a good mess. The

mess Jesus brings offers you incredible satisfaction. The mess he brings into your life will be accompanied by joy. The mess that he brings into your life is thrilling. It is like riding a wave runner at full speed over choppy waters. There is nothing more fun than the Christian life.

So I say, if you are tired of playing it safe, if you are tired of always managing every detail of your life, if you are tired of always having to be in control, why not today come to Christ and say, "Christ, will you make a mess of my life?" You've already made a mess of it, friend. But if you've never said to the Lord, "Mess up my life," why not ask him to do that.

Last point, Jesus is not only a mess-maker, he is a dream builder. You know, every revolutionary overthrows the old order, the old nightmare to usher in a new dream. The Americans in 1776 were getting rid of the old nightmare of British rule. The French in 1789 were overthrowing the French Aristocracy. The Russians in 1917 were overthrowing the Czar. The Eastern Europeans in 1989 overthrew the communists. And Jesus Christ, the revolutionary, is overthrowing the old system of Jewish ritual. When he turned the water into wine, he was overthrowing the old purification rites. When he said, "Tear down this temple," he was overthrowing the Jewish system of priests and sacrifices.

And every revolution is propelled by a dream. In America it was the dream that all of us were created equal and endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights – life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In France, it was liberty, equality, and fraternity. In Russia, it was the worker's paradise. In Eastern Europe, it was the dream of democracy.

Jesus Christ, in his revolution, has a dream. There is a deeper meaning behind the actions Christ took. He's not just blessing the little wedding. His turning water into wine was a sign. He is pointing to a future where those of us who are his followers will be invited to a great wedding feast when Christ comes back for his bride, the church. His statements about tearing down the temple and rebuilding it in three days, it was a sign. He's pointing ahead to his resurrected body and the hope of resurrection for all who are connected to Christ.

Let me finish with this thought. Every revolution falls short of its original dream. In America, the dream that we're all created equal still hasn't been realized 225 years after our revolution. In France, the dream of fraternity and equality was immediately lost at the guillotine with thousands of beheadings. In Russia, the dream of a worker's paradise turned into a worker's prison. But Jesus Christ, the revolutionary, delivers on his promise. As you look out on the world today, you say things look really bleak. Do not let the situations that you read about in Iraq, Iran, North Korea, or around the world rob you of the revolutionary dream – a dream better than the one celebrated by the Fall of the Berlin Wall – the dream of one day sitting down with Jesus Christ in the New Jerusalem at his great marriage feast in your resurrected body, and eternally enjoying his company and the loving company of all who are attached to him. Let's pray.

If anyone is in Christ the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Cor. 5:17)

- I. Christ the Agenda-Setter (John 2:1-4)
 - A. He decides what he will do. (Psalm 115)
 - B. He decides when he will do it.
- II. Christ the Grace-Giver (John 2:5-11)
 - A. Giving that Supplies the Humble (John 2:5)
 - B. Giving that Surpasses Expectations (John 2:6-10)
 - C. Giving that Surprises the Insignificant
- III. Christ the Mess-Maker (John 2:12-17)
- IV. Christ the Dream-Builder (John 2:18-22)
 - A. The Old Has Gone
 - B. The New Has Come

Where Is God When I'm Discontented?

Rich Nathan

August 14-15, 2004

Where Is God When Life Is Hard Series

Philippians 4:10-13

I've been doing a series titled "Where is God When Life is Hard?" and today I want to talk about the subject of contentment. We live in a culture that breeds discontent, don't we? What is one of the major secrets of contemporary marketing except to rub a sense of discontent with what you own, where you've gone, what you look like, and the service you're entitled to.

Think of the absolute obsession that our culture has with a person's abs. Just look at the magazine titles screaming at you as you go through the supermarket check out line. Here you are, you have your Hostess Ho-Ho's, and you are purchasing your chips and dip, your Hershey's Syrup and Bosco. These are the magazine headlines you read (and these are actual article titles from this month!):

- Banish Buddha Belly: Six Moves in Fifteen Minutes
- Tone Your Abs, Butt and Legs: The Easiest Workout to Get Leaner, Stronger and Faster
- Shrink Your Waistline Now!
- A Firmer Belly Now: In One Move
- Flat Abs: Fast
- Melt Away Tummy Fat: Five Moves for a Flat Tummy

Do you think your grandmother spent even five seconds worrying about her abs? My grandmother wore a big grandma dress and you couldn't see her abs anyway because she always wore an apron over her dress.

You even can't pick up Readers' Digest any more without being exhorted to firm up your abs. We live in a culture that breeds discontent.

What do you think about that commercial for a moisturizer or some type of cream, but it has a very attractive woman who looks sincerely into the camera and says: I'm 36, but you'd never know it. Now, you know that the implicit message is that if you are over 30, you are over the hill. And if you don't buy this moisturizer, then the only alternative for you is to stay in your house in the dark with a bag over your head because you'd be too horrible to look at in public. Remember that old commercial that advertised some type of cream to remove "horrid age spots?" Are any of you old enough to remember that?

My wife, Marlene, told me that a survey has been done saying that within something like five minutes of flipping through a women's magazine, women become measurably depressed. Here you are, you are not just competing with a woman on your street, or in

your neighborhood, you are competing with some of the most beautiful women in the world. And you aren't even competing with women as they are in reality; you are competing with an airbrushed, computer-enhanced, cosmetic surgery version of the most beautiful women in the world.

I read an article by a magazine reporter who followed a professional model for a week. She discovered that for a photo shoot on a hair-coloring product this woman had four days of treatment by professional colorists for her hair to have that healthy shine. Of course, women are supposed to get the same look by pouring that product on their hair for 20 minutes in the shower. For this model's cover shot, they took 360 photographs for just one picture. And this is a professional model who really knows how to make her looks work for her. An entire day, from 4 a.m. to 6 p.m., is spent on her looks. Several professionals take an hour and a half to style her hair and paint her face. She has a personal trainer. Her entire diet is focused on her body. She had breast surgery. She's photographed through frosted filters.

Do you think, women, that as you flip through fashion magazines that you are going to become a bit discontented with your looks? Or that you can compare yourself with that?

The culture of discontentment for women starts when you are a little girl. Think about the whole Barbie industry and the dolls we buy for our daughters. Before 1959 little girls played with baby dolls. But Barbie has become the ideal of what should appear on the cover of Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issues. You know Barbie's stats, don't you? If Barbie was a real woman, she would be 6'2", weigh 108 pounds; her measurements would be 36-18-33. That's certainly a standard that a lot of women can live up to!

Look at shows like Extreme Makeover, or the The Swan. Again, what are they communicating other than a person ought to be radically discontented unless we totally alter their appearance.

Let me ask you a few questions today as we consider the subject of contentment. What do you do that breeds discontent in your life? Does your reading breed a sense of discontent in you? Does flipping through fashion magazines make you discontented with your wardrobe, your body, your face, or skin? Does reading romance novels make you discontented with your love life? Does watching home decorating shows make you discontented with your house? Does reading books on finance or investments, going to seminars, make you discontented with your possessions? Does test driving cars, or walking through a mall make you discontented? What is it that you do that breeds discontentment?

I've called today's talk, "Where is God When I'm Discontented?" Let's pray.

SLIDE
Philippians 4:10-13

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Let me give you a definition of contentment that we can draw out of this text. Paul is saying, "I've learned to be independent of my external circumstances."

SLIDE

V. 11: I've learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

I've learned to be not determined by my external circumstances. Maybe I'm wealthy. Maybe I'm poor.

SLIDE

V. 12: I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry whether living in plenty or in want.

In any and every situation, not only the easy situations, but also the hard situations, situations of suffering, of pain, of disappointment – whatever situation, I have learned to not to be determined by my circumstance. What's his secret?

SLIDE

V. 13: I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

I've learned to be independent, not determined by my external circumstances, because I've discovered resources in the Lord that are more than adequate for any and every circumstance.

Let me quickly tell you, so that you aren't confused today, what Christian contentment is not. Christian contentment does not mean to just be a doormat for everyone to wipe his or her feet on. Christian contentment is not, here I am suffering under an unjust government, I should never protest. I should never try to organize. I should just simply live my life with this terrible situation. Christian contentment is not if you are a wife and your husband is slapping you around, you just need to learn how to be content.

The message of Christianity has never been if you are in poverty; just continue to live in poverty. If you are being abused, just continue to be abused. In fact, Christianity has always had an incredible ability to lift people up and give people a new sense of dignity. There is a sociological law, in fact, called redemption and lift. And what sociologists have done is that within one generation of Christianity thoroughly permeating a society, the society will become more prosperous. People will be more productive. Houses will be cleaner. Educational levels will rise. Alcoholism rates will lower. There will be fewer

children born out of wedlock. Whenever Christianity and the gospel thoroughly permeates a society the society is going to be lifted.

Christians have always said to people: If you have the power to change your circumstances for the better, while remaining obedient to God, do so. If you can better yourself and your situation by getting an education so that you can make more money and provide better for your family, do so. If you can take another job where you aren't being abused, get another job. If you can improve your marriage so that it is more pleasant, so that you relate more kindly and lovingly to each other, then improve your marriage.

But Christians also recognize that there is much of life that we cannot change. It may be that we don't have the power to change our circumstances. Or it may be that if we chose to change our circumstances, we would become disobedient to God. For example, we may not have the power to get ourselves out of a traffic jam, how can I be contented when I'm stuck in traffic? Or I may be disobedient to God by breaking my marriage vows and getting out of my unpleasant marriage. How can I be content by remaining in a marriage that is way less than perfect? So contentment does not mean that I never try to change my circumstance if I can.

And contentment never means that we become complacent or resigned to our sin or our present level of spirituality.

- Oh, well, that's just the way I am. I'm just a gossip.
- Oh well, this church happens to be my little private addiction. But I just need to become content with it.
- I'm just not a very good servant. I never serve people in the church. I never give myself away to anyone else in the church. I just take church resources.
- I don't give sacrificially, but I just need to learn to be content with who I am.

Contentment does not mean complacency with our sin or our present level of spirituality.

Well, why then, are we so discontented concerning circumstances that we cannot change because we don't have the power to change them, or because to change them would be disobedient to God, as in the case of breaking our marriage vows or being unethical to get more business. Why are our moods so determined by our circumstances? Why are we so discontented in America today?

One major source of discontentment is comparing yourself to other people. In 2 Cor. 10:12 the apostle Paul said:

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We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.

It is not wise to engage in comparisons. Why not? Well, the major reason is because discontentment comes from unfavorable comparisons that you make with other people. Friend, look at your life. How much of your internal upset – grumbling, complaining, frustration, depression, discouragement, disappointment comes because you make an unfavorable comparison with another human being? Have you ever noticed that you can be quite happy with what you have until you discover that someone in your situation has more than you? For example, have you ever been happy with your salary or with your raise until you found out that a coworker makes more than you do, or got a bigger raise? Or maybe you are happy with your home until you visit your best friend from college's new home and her home has a 1000 square feet more than your home and her kitchen is your dream kitchen that you can't possibly afford.

Comparing yourself with other people is a major source of discontentment. Parents, how do you feel when your friend's child always succeeds? How do you feel when your friend's child is brilliant and is always on the honor role and your child, who is about the same age, is barely passing? How do you feel when your friend's child stars on every select team in athletics and your child spends the season always warming the bench? Or their child is obedient and is pursuing Christ while your child is forever rebelling, is experimenting with drugs, and is cold toward God. We parents often make comparisons between our children and other children and grow discontented when the comparison is unfavorable.

How do you feel when you aren't the most successful person in your company? Or you don't generate the most clients in your firm? Or your small group is not the biggest or the most successful? In fact, it is shrinking, not growing. How do you feel when you go to your high school reunion and all your friends are showing pictures of their children and their babies and you don't have any kids or they are celebrating their 20th anniversaries and you are still single? Or you go to a family reunion and everyone is there with their spouse, except you and you are still single and you don't have pictures of your children?

Oscar Wilde once told a story about the devil, who was walking across the desert. He came upon a spot where a number of minor demons were trying to torment a holy monk who had lived out in the desert in isolation. This holy man easily shook off all their temptations. They tried to tempt him with lust and he batted that away. They tried to tempt him with anger, and he was able to defeat that. The devil watched them failing and stepped forward and said to the little minor demons: "Let me show you how it is done." With that he whispered to the holy man: "Your brother has just been made the Bishop of the Church of Alexandria." Immediately, this holy man's countenance changed. You saw him move from a look of serenity to a scowl of jealousy and upset. The devil stepped back and he said: "That, my friends, is how you do it."

Let me ask you a question: With whom are you competing? Do you find yourself, even as an adult, competing with a brother or a sister? Are you competing with a close friend? We tend to compete with people's whose gifts or circumstances in life are most like our own. I've watched Christian musicians struggle with other Christian musicians.

Christian pastors compete with other Christian pastors. Mothers compete with other mothers. Leaders of singles groups compete with leaders of other singles groups.

Again, let me ask you a question: with whom are you competing? Maybe no one comes to mind. Maybe you initially say: Rich, I don't think I'm competing with anyone. Well, let's drill a little bit deeper here. Here is a way for you to figure out whether you are in competition with someone else. The apostle Paul commands us in Romans 12:15,

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Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

So, it is easy to figure out who you are in competition with. With whom do you find it difficult to fulfill this command to rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn? Whose success do you find it difficult to rejoice over? Who is it that when they are praised, you find yourself wincing? Do you find yourself wincing when your parent praises your brother or sister or an in-law? Do you find yourself wincing when you hear of the success of the present spouse of your ex-spouse? Do you wince at the praise or success that's being enjoyed by an old friend? Is there anyone about whom you say to yourself: If I hear one more great thing about so-and-so, I am going to scream.

Let's press this home even more deeply. Paul tells us not only to rejoice to those who rejoice, but to mourn with those who mourn. Is there anyone that you would secretly like to see fail? Or when we hear some bad news about them, when they're not doing so well, when their life circumstances are less than perfect, when they or a family member have failed and fallen on their face? You are secretly a little happy. You can tell that you are in competition with someone when you not only don't mourn about their unhappiness, but you actually fantasize that they might be taken down a peg or two.

How are you doing on the test of rejoicing with those who rejoice, and mourning with those who mourn?

Of course, comparisons can be made not only with real people, but with ideal people. You can compare yourself with someone in a magazine. One of the real horrors of pornography is that men will compare their mates to a picture in a magazine. Or perhaps you compare your spouse with an old flame, with a list of ideals that he or she doesn't attain to. Discontentment comes from comparisons.

And let me suggest at this point, one simple way to defeat the dragon of competition. F.B. Meyer, who was a godly, wonderful preacher at the beginning of the 20th century, honestly confessed that he struggled because another pastor, G. Campbell Morgan who drew bigger crowds than he did. Meyer said: "The only way I have ever found to defeat the power of comparisons is to pray for the person. So I've committed myself to daily pray blessing on G. Campbell Morgan."

Friend, do you think you could engage in that discipline, to pray blessing, to pray favor on the person with whom you are competing?

What's another source of discontentment? The second major source of discontentment is the attitude that what God has given you is never enough. It's the "never enough" syndrome. Like Bob in the movie "What About Bob," nothing is ever enough. I need, I need, I need. I want, I want, I want. Like ungrateful, spoiled, totally self-indulged children at Christmas, who look at a mass of expensive Christmas presents that they've been given and they cry and say: "Is this all you got me? I wanted something else. I wanted a bicycle. I wanted a different shirt. I wanted a new guitar."

A major source of discontentment is we say: "Never enough" concerning God's gifts to us. It is not enough. In fact, the heart of sin is an attitude that we look at God and say: "Sorry, God, what you give me, what you gave me is not good enough." Adam and Eve were given the Garden of Eden. They were living in total paradise, a perfect environment. They had perfect harmony with creation. They enjoyed a perfect unashamed transparent relationship with each other. And Adam and Eve also enjoyed total communion and total access to God.

But it was not enough. Because the most discontented creature in the universe, Satan, for whom his high position in heaven was not enough, decided to spread his discontent to the rest of God's creation. If you want to know what spiritual warfare is often about, it is often about Satan making you more discontented with what you have. And that's what he did with Adam and Eve in the Garden. They were living in a perfect environment. They had perfect circumstances, perfect relationships with each other, a perfect relationship with God. But he sowed the thought of discontentment in their minds and he said: "What you've been given by God is not enough. You have to go beyond the limits God has given you and eat fruit from the one tree God has forbidden you."

For King David in the Old Testament, the never enough of discontentment led him to an adulterous affair with Bathsheba and the killing of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah. Listen to the prophet Nathan's rebuke of King David after David had an affair, and murdered Uriah. He didn't say: David, you are just being true to yourself, like the New Jersey governor who recently confessed to a homosexual affair, he's just being true to himself. Here's what Nathan the prophet said to David in 2 Samuel 12:7:

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Then Nathan said to David: You are the man! This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: "I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own.

I would have given you even more. I gave you the kingdom. I would have given you even more. And yet, it still wasn't enough. You had to sin.

Do you see this attitude, friend, in your life, in any area? This grabbing, stealing, demanding what God has not given you. This attitude that says: "Even if I need to rebel against God, even if I need to break God's commandments, I'm going to do it because what God has given me is not enough."

"Never enough" could be the title of the history of the Israelites in the Old Testament. If you wanted to sum up Israelite history over the thousand years from the time they were set free from Egyptian captivity to the writing of the last book of the Old Testament, the book of Malachi, you could put over that history the title "Never Enough."

Go back to the beginning of Israel's history. Go back to the book of Exodus, where we find God answering Israel's prayers, sending them a deliverer in the person of Moses, striking the Egyptians with ten plagues, freeing Israel from slavery, leading them through the Red Sea miraculously, drowning their Egyptian pursuers. And immediately after they get on the other side of the Red Sea, they begin to complain: What you've done is not enough, God. Exodus 16:2-3

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In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death!"

We're hungry, so we accuse God's appointed leaders and God himself of holding back on us. God in grace provides bread from heaven for the Israelites. He sends them manna that they didn't have to work for. It just fell from the sky. But that's not enough. After a period of time that they were sick and tired of eating manna. We read in Numbers 11:4

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The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna."

Doesn't this sound like spoiled children? I don't like what you gave me for dinner. Is this what we're eating? I don't want it. Never enough.

Sometimes the never enough of discontentment concerns the ministry that God has given us. We're discontented with our place in God's kingdom. Why have we been given these gifts and not other gifts? I want to be able to teach. I want to be able to lead worship. I want to be able to counsel. Why have I been given this amount of influence and not great influence? Why this position and not a more important position?

Here is the last example from Israel's history. In Numbers 16 we read about a group of Levites, who have been assigned to assist the priests in the performance of their duties. Well, this group of Levites starts complaining about the role they've been given in God's kingdom. Led by the Levite Korah, they said: We want more. We want to not only be assistants, we want to be the main players. We want to be the stars. We don't want to be co-stars; we want to be the stars. We don't want the Academy Award for best supporting actor; we want the award for best actor. We want to offer the sacrifices and not just be associates. And listen to Moses rebuke of Korah and the Levites in Numbers 16:8-11

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Moses also said to Korah, "Now listen, you Levites! Isn't it enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the Israelite community and brought you near himself to do the work at the Lord's tabernacle and to stand before the community and minister to them? He has brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself, but now you are trying to get the priesthood too. It is against the Lord that you and all your followers have banded together. Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him?"

Aaron, of course, was the designated priest. They wanted his position. What I'd like you to do, if you have a Bible, is to underline in the Bible the phrase in v. 9, "isn't it enough for you."

Friend, let me ask you a personal question: where do you manifest discontentment in your life? Despite the many blessings of God on your life when do you regularly grumble and say, "Not enough?" Is it in your work? Are you discontented on the job that God has given you even though you are working and making a salary and eating – it is not enough. Are you discontented in your marriage? Do you like to think back to the good old days, the days when you were single? Have you forgotten how much you wanted to escape singlehood? Are you discontented with being a Christian? Do you sometimes fantasize about the good old days before you were saved? Have you forgotten your misery? Is there one area in your life that you regularly grumble and complain about like the Israelites?

And of course a third source of major discontentment for 21st century Americans is our addiction to materialism. We truly believe as 21st century Christian Americans that we will find meaning, purpose, fulfillment, and satisfaction in life through acquiring more stuff, even though the Bible tells us over and over again: you cannot find more meaning, you cannot find more purpose, you cannot find more fulfillment, you will not find satisfaction in getting more stuff. Ecclesiastes 5:10 says this:

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Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless.

Money and more stuff never satisfies the person who has it. Jesus himself told us that we can't find meaning in life; we can't find purpose in life through more stuff. Jesus said in Luke 12:15,

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Then Jesus said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

You won't find life, life worth living, satisfying, fulfilled, purposeful, meaningful life through acquiring more possessions. And if you need confirmation of God's Word, look at America today. Do you see a nation of contented people? Look at people you know, people in your workplace, in your classes, your roommates, friends, and family members. Look in the mirror. Do you see a nation of contented people? By any measurable standard, we Americans have infinitely more today materially than we had back in the 1950's. But are we really more contented? Are we really happier? Are we really living better lives?

Housing sizes have gone up. Back in the 1950's, a median new house size was 1100 square feet. Today the median new house is about 2400 square feet nationwide. Most homes in the 1950's had one bathroom. Now the most homes have 2½ bathrooms. Homes back in the 1950's virtually never had central air-conditioning. Most homes built since 1970 have central air and at least two-car attached garages.

But are we really more content? You know addiction counselors talk about the problem of tolerance. After a period of time drug abusers need greater and greater amounts of drugs to get the same high, or not even to get high but just to feel normal. Alcoholics need greater and greater amounts of alcohol just to cope. Sexual addicts need more and more deviant kinds of sex, and greater dosages of sex just to feel OK and to not feel agitated.

And I believe, friends, that we simply have no idea how addicted we Americans are and we Christian Americans are to material. We have no idea how much stuff we really believe that we need in order to be happy.

PHOTOS FROM *MATERIAL WORLD* BY PETER MENZEL AS EXAMPLES

And not only do we have more stuff than anyone else in the world, but we discontented Americans constantly demand bigger stuff. I mentioned houses before, but it goes beyond that into everything. A two-ton car is not nearly big enough. We need three-tons, four-tons, we need an SUV that requires two of its own parking spaces.

Have you noticed how much bigger sports equipment is now compared to the past? Tennis rackets: I remember playing tennis with one of these small wooden rackets. The heads on tennis rackets are now easily 3x larger in area than it was 20 years ago. Golf clubs: I mean the size of drivers is 3-4x larger than they used to be. People are swinging something that looks a 25 lb. sledgehammer. Look at the amount of

equipment that hockey goalies wear now compared to 20-25 years ago. There's about one square inch left for the puck to go into the net. Look at the helmets that pro football players wear now compared to 20-25 years ago. These guys come on and look like Darth Vader.

If you want to see the growth of sports equipment, look at the growth of the size of baseball gloves. If you go back to the days of Ty Cobb, back in the early part of the 20th century, guys were wearing baseball gloves that looked like leather mittens. Now, guys wear baseball gloves that are the size peach barrels. Catchers' mitts are the size of bedroom pillows. And have you noticed how big bedroom pillows are now? Compared to where they were 20-30 years ago? And do you know *how many* pillows everyone requires on their bed? We have to unmake our bed every night in order to get in.

If you are a follower of Christ, let me ask you a question that perhaps no one has ever asked you before. When does your purchase or ownership of some luxury become a sin and an offense against God? One of the things that has dropped out of contemporary evangelical lists of sin is the sin of undue luxury. We evangelicals have pared our list of sins down to a very few things, mostly sexual sin: homosexuality, adultery, premarital sex, pornography use. These are sins and they do reveal great rebellion against God. But we virtually never mention sins that Christian writers in the past focused on. Sins like pride or vanity, or a lack of modesty in dress. Many Christian women and men have no sense that they are offending God and sinning against other people through immodest dress.

And we almost never talk about the sin of self-indulgence through excessive luxury. May I ask you to do this before God, if you are a Christian? May I ask you to ask God: "Do I have too much? Do I need to stop buying for my house? Do I need to stop buying clothes? Do I need to pause and keep ratcheting up the kind of car I drive or recreational equipment I own because you want me to do something else with the money you've given me? Do you want me to do something other than indulge myself again?" May I ask you to ask God more than once? May I ask you to pray more than once and say: "Lord God, will you bring me to spiritual maturity concerning the issue of possessions and luxury. Lord God, will you give me your heart and mind concerning possessions, my house, my kitchen, my clothes, my electronic equipment, computers? Will you give me your heart and mind?"

Friend, God has not said to you that you have the liberty to do whatever you want with your money because you tithe. All of your money belongs to the Lord. Why not ask God what he wants you to do with it?

Well, how can we become content in a culture of discontentment? In a world of comparisons, and "never enough," in a country utterly addicted to materialism, how can we learn to become contented? The apostle Paul says in Phil. 4:11,

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I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

And then in v. 12,

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I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation...

In other words, I have learned how to live above my circumstances. I've learned to live despite my circumstances. I've learned to be independent of my circumstances. Even if my circumstances never change, I have learned to be content. Notice, the text does not command you to be content. Paul doesn't simply write and say: In every situation, be content. Christian contentment is not a matter of simple obedience. It has to do with a learning process that God puts you through in the school of life. God wants to teach you the ABC's of learning contentment.

You know, before anyone can write great poetry, they have to learn their ABC's. After they learn their ABC's, they begin to read simple books. You know, "See Dick run. Run, Dick, run. Run, run, run. Go, Spot, go." And then they begin to read literature. And then they learn how poets wrote in the past. And then they read poetry. And finally they are able to write poetry.

Before we learn the poetry of contentment, God puts us through the process of learning our ABC's as Christians. It is not automatic that just because you accepted Christ into your life that you will automatically get this point of not having your circumstances master you. This is something you need to learn. So, what is the secret we need to learn? Phil. 4:13,

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I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

The key to contentment is to learn to find resource in God that enables you to be peaceful, to have a quiet spirit, to even be joyful, whatever your circumstance. The key to contentment is learning how to find resource in God who enables you to live a peaceful, even a joyful life, whatever your circumstances.

I've listed the secret in terms of A-B-C.

A – Acknowledge God's providences in your life. Acknowledge God's sovereignty over your life. Friend, do you believe that whatever happens to you in life has to first pass through the hands of God before it gets to you? Let me say that again, do you believe that whatever you have, whatever your gifts are, whatever your situation is, whatever your relationships are, whether you are deprived in an area, whether you suffer, whether

you are unbelievably blessed, do you believe that whatever happens in your life first has to pass through the hands of God before it gets to you?

This is what the Bible teaches. Whether by God's express will, or by God's permissive will, nothing in heaven or on earth, or in hell happens unless God either sends it to you, or he allows it to come to you. Everything has to pass through the hands of God.

And the reason godly people in the past were able to be content despite terrible circumstances is that they acknowledged God's providences. They acknowledged God's sovereignty over their lives. And so they surrendered themselves in trust to the will of God.

David Brainerd, who was a wonderful, devout, godly young man in his 20's, was a missionary to American Indians back in the early 1700's. He suffered from horrible tuberculosis, hacking coughs, often times coughing up blood. When he was out in the wilderness, he suffered from great loneliness, hunger, and cold. He wrote this in his diary back in 1744: *My soul was sweetly resigned to God's disposal of me in every regard and I saw that nothing had happened to me but what was best for me.*

My soul was sweetly resigned to God's disposal of me in every regard, and I saw that nothing had happened to me but what was best for me. He could even be content despite the disappointment of not seeing more converts. David Brainerd wrote about that saying, *It pleased God to leave me to be very dry and barren. But he is just and he has made my soul acquiesce in his will in this regard. God had helped me to say "amen" to him. Good is the will of the Lord.* Brainerd believed that God was at work in everything.

Listen, discontented one, grumbling one: Do you ever engage in the spiritual exercise of saying: "Lord, I've been so upset about my job situation, about my family. I've been grumbling and complaining about my health. I'm so discontented about my finances. I've grumbled, complained, groaned, and whined about the fact that you have not presently answered my prayers for the salvation of a loved one. But today, I choose to believe that you are in control of my life. Today I will choose to trust that you know what is best for me and for the kingdom. Like Joseph, I'm going to say maybe other people intended what happened to me for evil, but you intended it for good. You are good. Your will is good. And I will resign myself to your will."

Acknowledge God's providences. Practice surrender.

B – Be grateful for God's provision: Practice thanksgiving. Dave Early, who is the pastor of New Life Church in Gahanna, wrote a wonderful little book on prayer that he titled *Prayer Odyssey: A Journey to Effective Prayer*. In his book he talks about the practice of thanksgiving. He says that he was called to a church member's house in the middle of the night by a husband who said: "Diane is in the closet with a cord around her neck. She says she's going to kill herself." Dave crawled out of bed and put on some clothes and drove over to their house. When he walked in, he said Diane was in

the closet threatening suicide. Her husband, Mark, had lost his job. They had great financial pressures. They had four tiny children. It was more than she could bear. All she saw ahead of her was total hopelessness. She couldn't take it any longer.

Dave said he had been practicing the discipline of saying thanks for the month before. Every day he was taking time to make a list of things that he was thankful for. Deliberately, as a discipline choosing to say thanks, he walked up to the closet and he said: "Diane, I'll make you a deal. If we can't come up with 100 reasons for you to be thankful to God, then you can go ahead and kill yourself. But if we come up with a hundred reasons, you have to come out and talk to us."

So, from inside the closet she said: "I'm not thankful for anything. I just want to die." Dave said: "Not yet. Let's first try to come up with a hundred reasons to give thanks." Her husband, Mark, yelled into the closet: "Stacy, Katie, Lindsay, and Matthew!" naming their four children. "That's four reasons to be thankful!"

"And the fact that we live in a house and not an apartment. You said that last week. That's five." "Did you eat dinner tonight? Lots of people around the world went hungry." She said: "Yes!" "That's six."

"Do you have a car?" Diane whispered from the closet: "I'm glad that grandma gave us that nice car." "That's seven."

"How about the cat?" Diane said: "I love that stupid cat." "That's 8."

"What about your parents? That's 9 and 10. Your brother and sister? That's 12. Plus your grandma, that's 13."

She said: "And my grandpa. That's 14."

Dave said: "Keep going." Diane from inside the closet began to list things and she started to laugh and came out of the closet. They went around the house and began to touch different items in the house, photographs and memories. By the end of the evening she was rejoicing.

Grumbling one, complaining one, discontented Christian, anyone who is here, can I ask you to engage in this discipline? Over the next week, will you take just two minutes in the morning to speak to God and to specifically say "thank you" for certain things in your life? Two minutes each day. Before you ask God for anything, will you take two minutes to tell God what you are thankful for. That you are alive, your kids, your grandkids, a hot shower.

A - Acknowledge God's providences: Practice surrender. B - Be grateful: practice thanksgiving.

And finally,

C – Connect with God's person: Practice abiding. We human beings are not independent from our circumstances. We live in the midst of our circumstances and we're often mastered by our circumstances. Only God is independent of circumstances. Only God lives above circumstance. So Paul says: I have learned the secret of being content. I've learned the secret of living independent of circumstance. What is the secret?

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V. 13: I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

By connecting with the one who is above circumstance, who is independent of circumstance, who is not ruled by circumstance, I can share that capacity. Fill me, therefore, Lord, with your own person. Fill me, therefore, Lord, with your Spirit. Fill me, therefore, Lord, with your attitude. Help me to look at life with your mind?

The secret of contentment, discontented ones, is not gritting your teeth and trying harder. I'm just going to be content today. Contentment is more like coming up from under water after you've been holding your breath for a couple of minutes. Contentment is like breaking through to the surface and gasping for air. Oh, it feels so good.

Grumbling person, complaining person, stop holding your spiritual breath. Breathe in the presence of God. Welcome the Holy Spirit into areas that you've been grumbling about in the past, areas that you are discontented in, areas that you are frustrated about. Invite the person of the Holy Spirit to come into that area of your life. Take a deep breath and say: Holy Spirit, fill me now. Lord Jesus, give me your heart toward this person I'm competing with. Lord Jesus, fill me with your thankful, joyful heart. Lord Jesus, fill me with your peace that passes understanding. In places, Lord, that I've been keeping you out and at arm's length, I welcome you in. Connect deeply with the person of God. Practice abiding. Practice welcoming God in to your life.

Here is the precious gift reserved for the children of God: Contentment. Don't go through life without receiving this gift. Let's pray.

- I. A Culture of Discontent
- II. What Contentment Is Not
 - A. Resigning Ourselves To Our Circumstances
 - B. Complacency With Our Sin
- III. Sources of Discontent
 - A. Unfavorable Comparisons (2 Cor. 12:10)
 - B. Unlimited Appetites – “Never Enough” (Gen. 3:1-8; 2 Sam. 12:7-9; Ex. 16:2,3; Num. 11:4-6; 16:8-11)
 - C. Unchecked Materialism (Eccl. 5:10; 1 Tim. 6:6-10)
- IV. The ABC'S of Contentment (Phil. 4:11-13)
 - A. Acknowledge God's Providences: Practice Surrender
 - B. Be Grateful For God's Provision: Practice Thanksgiving
 - C. Connect With God's Person: Practice Abiding

Appendix C: How do I do it? Preparing to Preach

Rich Nathan

A Typical Week of Sermon Prep:

On Tuesday morning I begin to devotionally read the text that I will be preaching on the following weekend. I am beginning to think through possible approaches, areas that I want to research, etc.

On Wednesday I jot down all of the materials that I want to collect for study. These could include word studies from theological dictionaries, commentary information, articles, quotes from books, materials from the internet, etc. I collect these on Wednesday and throw them all in a big file.

On Thursday morning, I begin to read through the materials, writing everything that comes to mind in a stream of consciousness kind of way. I find that one of the great mistakes that young preachers make is attempting to form their message too early in the process. That is why I never start with an outline because the temptation is to artificially force the passage into your preconceived mold. Instead, I simply (forgive me if this sound vulgar) "vomit" information for pages in my notepad. Once I've done that, I look at the mess and ask God to give me the central theme that has emerged from all of my study. Again, I do this only after I have done the creative exploratory work.

On Friday morning, I take all of the loose strands of thinking and discover in them an outline, a message title, and a thematic sentence. Then I dictate my message into a tape player word for word and my personal assistant types my manuscript. Before I had an assistant, I used to write out my messages out by hand word for word.

At 3:00 p.m. on Friday I am done with my own message preparation. At that time I mentor a small group of men and women in preaching. Their assigned text is the text that I will be speaking on that weekend. Since I have all ready done all the work for my own message, mentoring them takes no additional preparation.

We need to figure out, as preachers, what people's primary problem is. The difficulty that I have with much contemporary evangelical preaching is that it seems to assume that people's primary problem is a lack of social skills (therefore, practical "how-to" messages are what is needed) or that people's primary problem is emotional/psychological (therefore, people need some sort of cathartic experience). It is clear, at least in Jesus' mind, that people's primary problem is that they don't know God (John 15:21, 16:3, etc.) and don't understand His rule and reign in their lives. I like J.I. Packer's old distinction between knowing about God and knowing God. Most church people know about God, so they think they can move beyond "God talk"-that their deepest need is helpful tips on living life better. But the preacher should be the one person in the community who understand that people's deepest need is to know God.

My assumption when I get up to speak is that most in the congregation have not "tasted and seen that the Lord is good." I love that word "taste" regarding the preacher's task. What I am attempting to do week after week is to develop in the hearer's heart a taste for God and calling people to taste of God. Nothing is more personal than tasting. You can read a recipe in Bon Appetit, you can see a mouth-watering picture of a Thanksgiving meal, you can even come down into the kitchen and smell the meal cooking in the oven. But you don't know food until you have tasted it. And people don't have the personal involvement they need to have with God until they have tasted and seen that the Lord is good. Therefore, my goal week in and week out not to present the congregation with more helpful tips on reducing stress or three ways to spice up their love life. I do offer the helpful tips and three-this and the four-thats, but I want my tips to be connected in people's minds to a deeper knowledge of God. So, if people come away from my messages saying, "I feel like I have met with God" or "I have heard from God," then I have put the ball in the basket.

On Balanced Preaching:

I know the word "balance" has fallen out of favor, but I still appreciate it. As a person who is called to "feed the flock," I want to offer the church a balanced diet over the course of a couple of years. If I have been very horizontal and focused upon relationships with each other (marriage, work, child-raising), then I want to move toward vertical topics such as the attributes of God, the cross, or worship. If I have been spending too much time in the New Testament, then I want to do a series from the Old Testament. If I have done a series of topical teachings, then I want to move toward a book study. Of course there are seasonal demands-Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, etc. and strategic envisioning series (community, increasing service, capital campaigns, etc.). Finally, I leave space for significant national or social crises (Columbine, Presidential scandals, wars, etc.) The goal for every preacher, of course, is to preach "the whole counsel of God" and not just to keep riding your favorite hobby horse. I usually plan out my series about three months in advance.

On Reading Habits:

I read constantly, but not because I am such a spiritual person. I just happen to love to read. Fortunately, I am married to a wife who also enjoys reading and who allows me to enjoy my favorite pastime by spending lots of our free time in bookstores. On almost given day off, Marlene and I head to our local Borders Bookstore (a Barnes and Noble type of superstore with much better books). I always do a quick survey of the new non-fiction books that are out, pulling two or three of them off the shelf for a quick skim. I also look over the magazine rack and pull off magazines that look interesting. I read the New York Times Book Review once or twice a month. Rolling Stone's December issue is a great summary of the year's pop culture.

My two favorite magazines that keep me in touch with the intellectual currents of culture are The Wilson Quarterly, which contains great book and article summaries from virtually every academic discipline; and First Things, a magazine devoted to the integration of Christianity and life. I find myself over the years spending less and less

time in Christian bookstores, since much of what is being put out is simply a weaker rehash of what the secular market published two years ago. If I do read Christian books, my reading in the last several years has been confined mainly to theology and devotional literature. Also, I try to balance newer books with older books to protect against trendiness, while keeping up with the culture. And I always have a book of sheer pleasure reading on my nightstand for bedtime reading.

Advice to Young Preachers:

1. *Preach books of the Bible* for the first 4-5 years of your preaching ministry. Most young preachers really struggle with putting series together. That issue is dealt with if you preach through a book. It is an amazing stress reducer to know that next week's sermon is going to be James 1:11-16 because you just finished James 1:1-10. Moreover, preaching through a book will keep young preachers from the great mistake of preaching Christian books that they have just read or sermons they have just heard from someone else, rather than preaching the Bible. Book studies also create in you the habit of bridging the gulf between the world of the Bible and the world of today. Most contemporary preaching is completely unconnected to the world of the Bible and too quickly moves to application.

2. *Be yourself!* Don't take on someone else's persona. Virtually every preacher has his or her own kind of charm. It could be that you are funny, or warm and pastoral, or intense and convicting-but whatever you are, let it shine through. God wants to use you, not some "preacher person" that you are trying to become.

3. *Preach topical expository messages.* In my mind, all preaching should be expository because we should always be giving people the meaning of a certain text in its original context. And all preaching should be topical (even messages from a book series) because we are not giving people a running commentary of the text, but rather preaching the theme of a paragraph or a chapter of the scripture. I absolutely would avoid the kind of "topical preaching," which takes a verse from one book and a verse from another and puts it all together in an artificial outline completely apart from the context in which those verses were originally written. That trains your congregation to read the Bible in a haphazard fashion and at the end of the day people will have heard from you and your clever outline, but they won't necessarily have heard God's intended message through his Word.

4. *Write out your sermons word for word.* This makes sense for young preachers for several reasons. It keeps you from the kind of rigid outlines that begin with "First of all..." By writing out your message word for word, you hide your outline under the flesh of your message. Second, writing out your message gives you freedom to be spontaneous. That might seem counter-intuitive, but the clearer you know where you are going, the easier it is to depart and walk away from the podium and your notes. Ultimately, you want to be completely free from using notes so that you have eye-to-eye contact with the congregation, rather than eye-to-notes contact.

5. *Avoid current jargon, especially psycho-babble.* You do not want a congregation

filled with folks who are "getting in touch with their anger" or "healing the child within". These "Trojan Horse" phrases will kill you in the end. What you want as a preacher is a congregation of people who think in biblical categories: dying to self, repentance, forgiveness, etc. Part of your job as preachers is to bring about biblical thinking and biblical modes of expressing things in the lives of your hearers.

6. *Don't merely address the questions people are asking.* I love the debate between Karl Barth and Paul Tillich. Tillich said it was "the job of the church to answer the questions the world is asking." Barth responded: "Sometimes the world doesn't know what questions to ask." It is the case that the world is not necessarily asking questions about heaven and hell, self-denial, truth, courage, to name just a few biblical themes. Our job is, of course, not to be deliberately irrelevant, but to assist people to see the relevance of questions they are not asking and the answers the Bible offers.

Appendix D: Stupid Things That Preachers Do

Rich Nathan

Mistakes in Preaching

One of the gravest mistakes that we can make is to teach over people's heads.

Preachers often try to display the wide knowledge or reading that we've done. I don't remember who it was that said this, but I thought it was amusing at the time, so I'll share it with you. The person said that it was Jesus' injunction to feed my lambs, to feed my sheep, not to feed my giraffes. Some of us have our teachings at such a high level that no one can lay hold of him or her, certainly not lambs and sheep, but only giraffes. The way I would put it is, I've often told people that they need to put their cookies on a low shelf where anyone can come and reach and grab it.

It doesn't matter if a person has been college educated with a degree in Greek or Latin. We need to get our thoughts down. And I really like what Martin Luther had to say. He said that when he preached, he wasn't concerned about the doctors or lawyers who were listening to him. He preached as to be understood by milkmaids. He said in his characteristic way if the doctors and lawyers don't like it, they could leave. Well, I don't know if I would go that far, but in general we need to be simpler, not simplistic. We're not aiming to be foolish up there or belittle people's intellects. We want to give something for people's minds, but the simpler, the better. We need to get our vocabulary down to where people really are. Concepts such as *strongholds* or *flesh* should not be used in contemporary audiences. We must give word pictures for many concepts that we take for granted, so that what is being communicated from the pulpit, is the same thing that is being received by the audience.

Not Being Receptor-Oriented

I think it is important to be *receptor oriented*. And by receptor oriented I mean that as we consider the people, we *consider the questions that people are asking and try to answer those questions*. And I have described those questions before—questions about life, about death, about marriage, about fulfillment, and satisfaction. Now I would immediately add that it is imperative that we not simply say things that people can accept. *There is a fine line between receptor oriented, saying things, which can be received by people in the language and culture and thought forms that people understand and the heresy of accomodationism*. By accomodationism I mean simply saying what people want to hear and changing the message as the culture changes.

One of the marks of accomodationism in this last century is to eliminate the supernatural, any mention of the supernatural in the preaching of the gospel because modern people cannot accept supernatural things like angels or hell or miracles. So we need to walk that fine line between clothing our true message in the language of today and changing the message so people will accept it.

Not Speaking to Real People

I think that we often have a problem that in the early church was called the Docetic Heresy. The Docetic Heresy was the heresy that Jesus Christ wasn't truly incarnated in real flesh and blood, but that his body merely had an appearance of a body. In fact, He was pure God living in the appearance of a body.

Now where this would come into the problem of teaching is that we teach to an audience without thinking about real individuals. In other words, when I speak, *I must speak to concrete, real people*. The 33-year old mother who has two children, a part-time job, who is college-educated, black, middle class, married, living in a suburb, struggling with depression, struggling with guilt, wanting to minister and who is a year old in Christ. Or a male college student who was raised in a Christian home, but is having problems now with pornography, who is feeling guilty about himself, struggling to find his identity, is beginning to buy into the myth of advancing careers and fulfillment in money. It's concrete people like that and not just anyone at any time in history that we need to speak to.

Speak to professionals. Frequently say, Lots of people think Christianity, religion, salvation, and good for the guy living under a bridge. I like what Stephen Covey said, "Many people climb the ladder of success only to find the ladder is leaning on the wrong wall. They get to the top; got the degree; start the practice; got the big home; got about whatever and end up saying, "Is that all there is?"

Don't Be Intimidated

It is important that we not be intimidated by the one person who has a certain trait or axe to grind. Sometimes as we think about concrete people that we're speaking to, we can get intimidated by the one person who is overly concerned about a certain issue and we begin to speak with almost a rearview mirror mentality looking over our shoulders making sure that that person's peculiarities and preferences are accommodated. Don't do that. Phase out that person who you believe to be critical on one issue or another or they will ruin your teaching. I know educated seminarians (we have 25 or so ex-pastors in our congregation); dozens come to our Saturday night service for refreshment, so I will toss them a bone. *"I realize a few of you may be troubled by some of the manuscript problems with this text. I believe it's authentic even if misplaced. If you are interested in this kind of thing, I recommend Bruce Metzger's comments on the 3rd Critical Edition of the New Testament."* Then I can get on with the message and spend an unnecessary amount of time on an issue that address less than 1% of our audience.

Don't Try to Please Your Critics

You may be aware of somebody in your church that differs with you about your particular view about whether somebody can lose his or her salvation. You may differ with yourself on some things. You can really pull all of your punches and try to phrase everything to please that one critic. Don't do it. Preach your convictions. Where you don't need to be dogmatic, don't be dogmatic. But you cannot preach an acceptable message to every single person in your church, unless you want a church of one.

Displaying Knowledge

There is the temptation to say everything you know or everything you studied. Since you studied a great deal and you now know a great deal, there is a temptation to tell a person everything you know or you've studied, even though it has nothing to do with the message or dominant thought that the Lord wishes you to communicate. *One of the most difficult things to do in teaching or preaching is to decide what to throw out.* You can't, obviously, say everything you've ever learned. And so now you need to decide what is supposed to stay, and what is supposed to go. The thought that you need to throw out may be wonderful. It is intelligent. It is amusing. *But it doesn't serve any dominant theme, so I'm going to toss it.*

I would say there is a temptation to be overly intelligent or overly intellectual. We can suffer from the opposite tendency and that is to be routine, to be trite. Again, teaching requires hard work. And like any craft, it should be done well. We should have a certain level of pride, in a good sense, in doing a good job unto the Lord. But the temptation is to be overly intelligent. We need to deal with our ego problems. Every message needs a dominant theme and every point needs to serve that theme. If it does not, there are too many messages in this one message!

Too Many Imperatives Without Sufficient Indicatives

Exhortation needs to be built on a foundation of truth concerning the character of God and basic *doctrines of grace and of the cross*. Paul never starts with exhortation; he always starts with truth and then moves to exhortation. Too many teachings and too many churches suffer from too much exhortation. We're just beaten up by the 18-40 things we need to do. "You need to, you need to, you should, you should, you need to, etc..."

More Time on the Problem than on the Solution

What you should never do is spend more time on the problems than on the solutions. I heard a saying from the Puritans not too long ago that *the Puritans used to discern between false teaching and true teaching by whether the person spent more time discerning the problem than they did in offering the solution*. And, if you read any self-help book, that is clearly the methodology of the world. You spend about 90% of the book describing what "co-dependency" is about and all of the causes, and then the last chapter of the book gives you a couple of practical ways to not be co-dependent, or to escape alcoholism. *We want to discern the problem, get people in touch with the issue, but then spend a lot of time on the message of redemption—how do I get free from this?*

Avoid Unnecessary Dogmatism

We need to avoid unnecessary dogmatism. One of the things that will definitely turn off a modern listener is a person who is dogmatic in areas that need not be dogmatic. We need to avoid personal attack in a polemic style. Not only is this unloving, but also in an age that exalts talents, personal attacks will be utterly repugnant to your hearers. Generally speaking don't ever attack people by name. "That Michael Jackson and his crotch grabbing..." Don't ever talk bad about another church from the pulpit. Don't ever

talk bad about people from another religion. We need to be critical and paint accurate pictures of where a group or a doctrine is mis-guided and leaning away from the truth found in Scripture, but our attitude is not to be one of elitism or superiority.

Avoid routine presentations

Communicate the gospel using a fresh range of biblical pictures, not just the forensic, judicial description of righteousness. Don't tell the same old illustrations from the illustration book. Here are some themes that we are to communicate, but how we do it needs to change each time and we need to work hard to find *pictorial language* and stories that unpack these truths:

Alienated from the Father → reconciled, welcomed, brought home.

Enslaved by addiction → redeemed (freed from slavery)

Defeated by life → Christ as victor

Lost → Found

These phrases in and of themselves that sound spiritual, sound religious, but may have no meaning for your hearers. *Sin needs to be defined* because sin in the hearing of many people, sounds like sexual sin. People don't think today about having a sin nature, that they are in fact in their nature opposed to God, that there is something wrong internally in them. *Those terms need to be defined.* Again, people want to know that you drink from the well that you are dispensing. For example: *"Sin is like a dripping pipe in your house. No matter where you go in your house, you can hear the constant dripping and you can smell the mold that is being created from this dripping pipe."* Again, people want to know that you drink from the well that you are dispensing. They want to know that you have wrestled with each concept, each verse, each theme that you are preaching on in your message.

Avoid What You Don't Understand

Don't speak about that which you don't at all understand. You can tip your hat to it. You can treat certain truths with reverence. But I would not preach as a major subject or a dominant thought something that I simply didn't understand. Too often we speak about things that are way beyond our grasp and we need to speak about things in the house that we live in. This includes our illustrations. If we do not understand a medical term, a legal term, a computer term, a historical event, than do not use these in your messages. They simply ruin your credibility with people who work in the areas every day of the week. It is fine to acknowledge your amazement regarding one of these areas and something you may be learning from someone in your audience, but do not approach any topic that you do not understand and teach on it.

Avoid the Trojan Horse of Language

The old story of the Trojan Horse talks about how out of the trap door came all of these soldiers to attack the city of Troy. In the same way, modern language is loaded with other kinds of meaning. *When we're selecting a modern term*, particularly terms from psychology or terms from therapy, we need to be careful because out from the bottom of those terms can spring many things which we never intended and were never intended from the scriptures. So beware of the Trojan Horse of language. Teaching is a

wonderful privilege; a holy calling, hard work, a walk through a series of landmines, an act of love, and an act of kindness. It should create in you a mix of emotions – fear, awe, love, dependence on God, inadequacy. Bring your whole person to bear as you perform this.

Avoid Humor if You Aren't Funny

One last thing to avoid – humor, if you're not funny! Humor is great to communicate humanity and vulnerability. It builds connections.

Avoid Wearing Out the Same Phrase and Being Motivational

We must vary our emotional pitch; otherwise it's like a Chinese Water Torture. We need breaks from the intensity.

After We Preach: The Problem of Spiritual Warfare

One of the things that used to happen to me after I would preach is that I would immediately be spiritually attacked. I have heard that other preachers have suffered from this from time to time. But I used to go into a really significant depression. I never got nervous before I got up to speak, but after I spoke I would sit down and have an incredible sense of failure. The overwhelming feeling was “I blew it.” That was horrible. I would really be depressed. It was almost like a gloom came over me.

Now, whether you suffer from feelings of depression after you preach, or feelings of elation, both of those things can be open doors to spiritual attack and spiritual warfare. The picture the Lord gave me, and I would like to offer to you in combating spiritual warfare, is taken from the Old Testament. Every day the Lord called the priests who were ministering before the curtain to present Him with these different show breads. They were warm breads that would be presented before the curtain. I believe the reason why those breads had to be presented each day was that the priests were saying to the Lord, “We offer to you the fruit of our labor, good and bad.” What I have done is to try to be like a priest in my prayer immediately after I preach. I view myself as presenting to the Lord the fruit of my labor. “Lord, for good or bad, I present to you this message. I ask you to give it effect in people's lives, but I am going to leave this message now in your hands.”

Exegetical Mistakes

About 20 years ago DA Carson, a professor at The Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, wrote a wonderfully helpful little book titled “Exegetical Fallacies.” By exegesis we simply are talking about the process by which we conclude “this passages means such and such.” In Carson's book he lists dozens of “exegetical fallacies.” He breaks up these fallacies into four major categories:

1. Word Study Fallacies
2. Grammatical Fallacies
3. Logical Fallacies
4. Presuppositional and Historical Fallacies

Word Study Fallacies

Carson suggests, “One of the most enduring of errors is the root fallacy.” This suggests that the meaning of a word is determined by its etymology. That is by looking at the root or the roots of a word. But etymology will only get us so far. For example, Anthony’s Thiselton explains to us that our English word “nice” comes from the Latin “nescius” which means ignorant. Imagine a preacher who is not familiar with the English language preaching a sermon on a text about “a nice woman who helped her neighbor.” Yet, so many preachers dazzle their audiences by tracing out the hidden meaning or the root meaning or the literal meaning of a word like “nice” and they pull out of the bag a word like “ignorant.”

So often in different word study books you will find discussions about how a particular Greek word is made up of a compound that really gets at the root meaning. For example, the Greek word “huperetas” is said to come from a compound word made up of “hupo” (under) and “eresso” (which means to row). So preachers will discuss at great length the role of the under rower in a Roman ship and suggest that’s what was in Paul’s mind when he talked about being a servant. The only problem is that this particular Greek word “huperetas” is virtually never used of a rower or of an under rower in any Greek text that anyone can find. You simply cannot break up a compound word into its constituent parts and definitively get some secret meaning from those part. For example, you do not get great insight by breaking up the word “butterfly” into its parts “butter” and “fly.” Nor does the word “pineapple” break up easily into the words “pine” and “apple” as if a pineapple is a special kind of apple that grows on pine trees.

Now the real trick for people who do not know Greek is to *make sure that the tools you are using are very reliable tools*. One book that should be avoided at all costs is Vine’s Dictionary of the New Testament. It is notoriously unreliable. Vine’s swings wildly between the truly insightful and the simply impossible. It is far more useful for you to look up the word you are seeking to understand in the New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology by Colin Brown.

A second word study fallacy is what Carson calls “semantic anachronism.” Taking, for example, the Greek word “dunamis” and reading back into it the word “dynamite.” How many charismatic preachers have you heard take the promise of Jesus in Acts 1.8, “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you” and say, “What Jesus is talking about is you shall receive dynamite when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.” This is the exact opposite of the root word fallacy. Does anyone really believe that Jesus was thinking of dynamite when he talked about the Holy Spirit coming? Dynamite blows things up. It tears things down. It destroys things. The Holy Spirit is given to build things up; to unify and to reconcile.

A great illustration of the semantic anachronism is found in Paul Brand and Philip Yancy’s material on the meaning of “blood” in the New Testament. Paul Brand has written very helpfully about the medical aspects of leprosy. He also wrote a great deal about the biological aspects of blood. How blood flushes out cellular impurities and transports nourishment to every part of the body. The problem is that Brand and Yancy

take this biological concept and transfer it to the meaning the author's of the New Testament intended when they talked about the importance of the "blood of Christ." Of course, the authors of the New Testament never meant to use "blood" in this fashion at all. It is entirely misleading to give this as a backdrop for the word "blood." With "blood," the New Testament writers were referring to the violent sacrificial death of Jesus. They were specifically talking about the death of Christ and his atoning work at the cross. They were not thinking about the properties of blood that cleanses or nourishes.

A third exegetical fallacy concerns the assumption that a particular word in the Bible has a fixed technical meaning. Usually that technical meaning nicely fits into the interpreter's systematic theology. An easy example of this fallacy is the word "sanctified." For example, sanctification is almost always defined as meaning the aggressive purification of a believer; the process by which he or she becomes increasingly holy following upon the instantaneous work of justification. Now sanctification can often have that meaning. But Paul sometimes uses the word "sanctified" to refer to "an instantaneous work, one-time work of grace." Thus when Paul stood before King Agrippa, he states the calling he received from Jesus was to "open the eyes of the Gentiles and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of sin to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:18).

Another great example of the "technical meaning" of terms is found in the frequent assertion that the Greek word "agapao" means something entirely different than the Greek word "phileo." Entire teachings have been developed based on this word study fallacy. The problem is that the New Testament frequently uses these words as synonyms. The notion that "agapao" always refers to a self-sacrificing love that does not take into account the worthiness of the recipient and the Greek word "phileo" always refers to friendship love is simply untrue. So we have a raft of sermons from John 21 regarding the restoration of Jesus and Peter built on the supposed distinction between Jesus' statement, "Do you love (agapao) me?" and Peter's response, "I phileo you." Quite apart from the fact that these two words have an overlapping semantic range, and are often used by John as synonyms, it might be helpful to note that the conversation that Jesus had with Peter took place not in Greek, but in Aramaic. If there was a subtle distinction in the words, it would have been entirely lost in the original conversation.

This kind of supposed technical use of terms is found in many charismatic discussions of baptism of the Holy Spirit. Charismatic and Pentecostal teaching will often distinguish between Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 12:13, which they translate, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and we were all given one Spirit to drink" and the so-called "baptism in the Holy Spirit," which Jesus refers to in Acts 1:8. How many times have you seen the discussion, "See here in 1 Cor. 12 the baptizing agent is the Holy Spirit. In Acts 1:8 the baptizing agent is Jesus. In 1 Cor. 12 a person is baptized into the body of Christ. Whereas in Acts 1:8 a person is baptized into the Holy Spirit." The problem there is that the same Greek preposition "en" is used in both texts and can be translated "in" or "by" or "for"

depending upon the context. Now, however one argues the timing of the so-called baptism in the Holy Spirit, whether it is subsequent to salvation or contemporaneous with salvation, your perspective cannot be founded upon the technical meaning of a preposition.

Logical Fallacies

One of the logical fallacies preachers often will fall into is *framing the question that the Bible passage in question may or may not answer*. Thus in 1 Thessalonians 4 a person might ask was Paul teaching here a pre-tribulational or post-tribulational rapture? Likewise, when approaching 1 Timothy 2 we might ask, was the apostle Paul a feminist or a chauvinist?

Presuppositional Fallacies

Very often a scholar in a particular discipline outside of theology will read his or her presuppositions into the biblical text and “surprisingly” find that the apostle Paul is saying the very same thing that Freud or Jung or the Human Potential Movement said 19 centuries later. Whatever you think of the psychological worth of the concept of boundaries (I happen to think it is a very useful concept), the exegesis in Cloud and Townsend’s book is atrocious.