

A Congregant's Guide to Preaching

For the congregation of
Providence Presbyterian Church

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Preaching is a weekly discipline for the Christian, and yet can be difficult to understand. There is a reason many books have been written on the *what*, *how*, and *why* of preaching. The preaching of God's Word is the most important thing we can give ourselves to on a weekly basis, and it is central to Christian faith and life. It has been rightly said that Christianity stands or falls by its view of preaching.¹

This booklet will briefly examine a theology of preaching. While much more can and ought to be said, this booklet serves as a congregant's guide to the *what* of preaching. May you be encouraged to see the primacy of preaching for faith and life. This booklet will look at four areas: (1) The Preaching, (2) The Preacher, (3) The People, and (4) The Passage.

The Preaching

Preaching is *God's* ordained plan to gather and perfect the saints through the church. We will examine briefly the theology of preaching from the Bible, the Westminster Standards, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church Book of Church Order, and history.

The Bible Tells Me So

The most basic reason ministers preach is because Christ has *commanded* that his ministers preach (see Mark 16:15). Preaching is not, therefore, man's invention but is by divine institution. Therefore, in order to understand

¹ See P.T. Forysth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (Blackwood, South Australia: New Creation Publications, 1993), 1ff.

preaching we must go to the Bible. Because the Bible isn't a textbook on preaching, so it is imperative that we address several passages that shed light on a biblical view of preaching. We will only draw attention to five:

- Isaiah 40:9–11: “*Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, 'Behold your God!' Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.*” In the immediate context, this passage is dealing with the abiding significance of God's Word. Creation itself is perishing but God's Word remains forever (v. 8). In vv. 9–11 the prophet turns to address the “herald of good news” (v. 9). It is an apt description of the Gospel preacher. The word “Gospel” literally means “good news.” Those who preach are likened to heralds. Why the designation of a herald? There are several reasons. A herald does not speak his own words, but he has been sent to speak another's words. In preaching, the preacher does not speak his own opinions or ideas, but speaks as an *ambassador*—bringing God's Word to God's people (cf. 2 Cor. 5:20). Further, a herald is meant to speak with *authority*. Throughout history, heralds proclaimed the king's word—and though he himself was not the king, his words were invested with the king's authority. Preaching isn't only

communication, it is authoritative communication. Finally, a herald *announces*: “Behold your God!” Announcement or proclamation is distinct from teaching, arguing, or counseling—though it often may include these aspects—in its breadth. The announcement of the Gospel carries with it a burden and declaration of who God is and what he requires of his people.² Preaching's greatest responsibility is to bring the weightiness of God to the people of God.

- Romans 1:15–17: *So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'*” Paul tells the Romans he is eager to visit them so that he might “preach the gospel” to them (v. 15). In v. 16 Paul expresses why he is eager to preach the gospel. It is because the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” Preaching isn't a demonstration of a preacher's communication skills (see 1 Cor. 2:4), but it is a divine diffusion of God's power from heaven for salvation. Further, as Paul writes: “For salvation,” he doesn't simply mean *conversion*, but he means the *fullness of salvation*—conversion, faith/repentance, justification, adoption, sanctification, preservation, and glorification. Preaching is God's

² See this helpful article: John Piper, “Advice to Pastors: Preach the Word,” accessed at: <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/advice-to-pastors-preach-the-word>. See also: Barry York, “Preaching Versus Teaching,” accessed at: <http://gentlereformation.com/2017/01/16/preaching-versus-teaching/>.

primary way of saving his people, building them up in faith, and preserving their souls to glory.

- Romans 10:17: “*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*” Paul has just made a wonderful statement that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (v. 13). But this statement brings to Paul's mind several questions in vv. 14–16—namely, how do people know *who* to call on and *how* do they call on him? Paul's simple answer is that God uses the preaching of the Word: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” Paul's emphasis on “hearing” reflects the primacy of “preaching” (see v. 14). Without preaching, and therefore without hearing, faith doesn't ordinarily exist.³ This is why we often speak of preaching as a means of grace. It is God's ordinary way of increasing and encouraging our faith and growth in grace. Without the preaching of the Word we can't expect to grow or be strengthened in our Christian lives.
- 1 Corinthians 2:6–16: “*Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imag-*

³ See also Larry Wilson, “Especially the Preaching of the Word,” in *Ordained Servant*, accessed at: https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=7.

ined, what God has prepared for those who love him'— these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. 'For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ." In speaking about the goal of his preaching labors, Paul says: "But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory" (v. 7). Paul's words "secret and hidden wisdom" does not mean some sort of esoteric gnosticism. Rather, God's thoughts are so above and beyond our natural ability to understand, that we need the Holy Spirit (v. 10); without the Holy Spirit, God would be unknown. It is vitally important to remember that though preaching comes from the mouth of men to men, it is a work of the Holy Spirit. We are utterly and totally dependent

on the Spirit to rightly understand and apply the preaching of God's Word.⁴

- Galatians 3:1–9: *“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.* Paul makes an interesting statement in v. 1 to the Galatians: “It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.” We know that the Galatians did not *physically* see Christ crucified in Jerusalem. So what does Paul mean? He is speaking of the power and the influence of preaching. Preaching, while a verbal activity, is blessed by the Spirit of God to be something much more than verbal communication. There is a spiritual aspect to preaching wherein the Spirit causes the eyes of faith to see Christ. For Paul,

⁴ See Arturo G. Azurdia III, *Spirit Empowered Preaching* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1998).

hearing faithful preaching is beholding the glory of Christ.

God authoritatively addresses his people through preaching to build them up in faith and reveal his will to them. Our theology of preaching is built on this biblical foundation of declaration or proclamation. Preaching is the means of beholding God in his glory.⁵

A Standard Definition

The Westminster Standards address preaching in several important places and draw out the depth of the biblical perspective in the following ways:

- WCF 7.6 (cf. WLC Q&A 35): *“Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance, was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.”* In the very least this paragraph teaches the simplicity by which the covenant is now administered and preaching is given a covenantal significance. Perhaps we could say in order to know about the covenant and participate in the covenant, sitting under the preaching of the Word is imperative. It is God's way of communicating the glorious redemption found in Christ to his people.⁶
- WCF 21.5: *“The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God ... are all parts of*

⁵ For a helpful and lengthy discussion of Reformed worship see Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of Christ-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), esp. 33–92.

⁶ See also G. VanDooren, “The Beauty of Reformed Worship” in *New Horizons*, April 2002.

the ordinary religious worship of God.” The confession identifies the preaching and hearing of God's Word not only as an act of obedience to God but also defines these as part “of the ordinary religious worship of God.” The confession rightly teaches that our devotion and obedience to God ought to be measured by faithful participation and attendance upon the preaching of God's Word.

- WSC Q&A 89: Like we saw in the Scriptures cited above, the Shorter Catechism defends that “*the Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching, of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners.*”⁷ While we would never discourage the *private* reading of God's Word (cf. Ps. 1), we cannot disparage or dispense with the *necessity* of preaching. As we saw earlier, Paul firmly believed that faith came by *hearing*. There is a special blessing attached to the preaching and hearing of God's Word that isn't given in our reading. The Holy Spirit ordinary way of convincing and converting sinners is through the preaching of the Word. This has great implications for our view of the church, missions, and evangelism—preaching and hearing God's Word is the greatest task the church has been given.
- WLC Q&A 53: At this point, the catechism deals with Christ in his exaltation. The Larger Catechism addresses how Christ is exalted in his ascension. Note the connection between Christ's exaltation and preaching: “*Christ was exalted in his ascension ... giving them commission to preach the gospel to all nations.*”

⁷ Emphasis added.

One of the clearest ways the church exalts Christ in this sinful world is to preach the Gospel throughout the world (cf. Matt. 28:18ff). Preaching is the open declaration that Christ has received all power and authority.

Real Men Ask for Direction

The Directory for the Public Worship of God is a subordinate document to the Westminster Standards in the OPC. It expresses our common understanding of how we worship God. The Directory theologically divides between *elements* and *circumstances* of worship. Elements of worship are the non-negotiable aspects of *what* we do in worship (e.g. prayer) whereas circumstances relate to issues of *how* we worship (e.g. time of day for worship services).⁸ In the section on elements of public worship the Directory addresses “The Preaching of God's Word.” The Directory sheds some light on a couple issues regarding our theology of preaching:

- *The Content:* The Directory, recognizing the indispensability of preaching, stresses that *only* the Word of God may be preached (as opposed to the wisdom of man). It goes on and further defines the content of preaching as “always setting forth Jesus Christ, the author and finisher of our faith” (DPW II.A.3.a). There is some disagreement as to what “setting forth Jesus Christ” means in homiletics (the study of preaching). It has become commonplace to think the content of preaching ought to be

⁸ See also Terry L. Johnson, “The Regulative Principle of Worship,” accessed at <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2003/the-regulative-principle-of-worship/>.

Gospel-centered. Some have even restricted the Gospel only to that which relates to the death of Jesus on the cross.

While the death of Jesus on the cross is certainly paramount to our understanding of the Gospel (see 1 Cor. 15:3), the work of Christ and salvation extends beyond just the cross.⁹ When the *Directory* states that Jesus Christ must always be set forth, it is helpful to remember that there are a number of ways to set forth Jesus Christ. The goal of preaching is to preach the *whole* Person and *whole* work of Christ. Not only his death, but also his life. Not only as Savior, but also as Judge. Not only as law-keeper, but also as an example. Not only as incarnate, but also as greatly exalted. We set forth Christ in his glory, offices, natures, promises, threatenings, etc. Ultimately, the preacher aims to make Jesus Christ known (cf. John 17:3).

- *The Approach:* We will discuss this more at length below, but the Directory requires an *approach* to preaching called expositional. Rather than defining expositional preaching, the directory explains what expository preaching is *not*: “[The preacher must] not use a text merely as a point of departure” (DPW II.A.3.b). Expositional preaching is simply dealing with the chosen text as the text is to be dealt with. But more on this later.

⁹ Note for example that in Romans 2:16 Paul writes: “On that day, when according to my Gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.” Paul understood there was a connection between the Gospel and judgment. Perhaps indicative that a broader meaning of the Gospel is much more than justification by faith alone but incorporates the whole Person and work of Jesus Christ.

- *The Applications:* The final paragraph notes the multi-faceted applications of preaching: (1) Build up the saints, (2) Beseech the unconverted, (3) An unadulterated and uncompromising proclamation of salvation by grace, (4) Instruction in the full counsel of God, (5) Exhortations to obedience, (6) Warnings against sin, and (7) Discriminating between sound theology and soul-destroying teachings. Application is largely what distinguishes preaching from teaching. Preaching expresses the burden of the text so that the biblical text is brought home not only to the head, but also to the heart, affections, and will.

Expositional, What?

Let's unwrap expositional preaching a bit more. Expositional preaching has become a popular way to speak of preaching in Reformed circles, yet, it is open to many misunderstandings. What precisely is meant by “expositional”? It is important to remember that expositional preaching comes in a variety of *forms*.¹⁰ The following models are often viewed as valid forms of expositional preaching when done correctly:

- The *lectio continua* model is simply preaching verse by verse and chapter by chapter through any given book of the Bible. It is this model that people most often characterize as expositional preaching.

¹⁰ See also Dennis E. Johnson, “Expository Preaching: What Is It and Why Should We Do It?” in *Ordained Servant*, accessed at: www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=485.

- The biblical theological model looks at the central theological theme(s) of any given author within the greater canonical context. The biblical theological model highlights the biblical author's distinctive theological perspective while fitting it within the greater unity of the Bible.¹¹
- The redemptive historical model beelines every sermon to the cross of Jesus Christ. The redemptive historical model seeks to terminate every text in the work of Jesus Christ by drawing lines of continuity and identifying patterns, especially in historical narratives. Often there is a heavy focus on the *indicative* of faith.¹²
- The systematic theological model takes specific texts and extracts points of theology and doctrine showing how the Bible addresses these points of theology. The systematic theological model is concerned with preaching heads of doctrine.¹³
- The catechetical model is largely used by Reformed preachers to preach from the catechisms of the church. Using the Heidelberg Catechism's 52 Lord's Day (or even the WSC or WLC), they preach from a passage of Scripture that underscores the particular catechetical concern.¹⁴

11 See Edmund Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R, 1979) and Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

12 See Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 1999. Also, Dennis Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ From All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007).

13 For helpful thoughts see Petrus Van Mascricht, *The Best Method of Preaching*, trans. Todd Rester (Grand Rapids, MI: RHB, 2013), chp. 4.

14 See R.E. Knodel Jr., "Catechetical Preaching" in *Ordained Servant*, 7.1 (Jan. 1998), 16–19.

- The thematic model traces out particular themes through a wide range of texts, or one individual text to preach many sermons.¹⁵

It is important to bear in mind that expositional preaching has a variety of models. Again, the importance is that the preacher preaches the “chosen text” and doesn't use it to address the opinions or traditions of men. How does one assess which model is preferable? Well, that largely depends on a number of circumstances like the preacher's personality, time availability, the genre of a given text, the ability of the congregation to listen, the needs of the congregation, etc. In sum, each of these forms of expositional preaching have their strengths and weaknesses and have their place in the ministry of the Word. It is probably best that a preacher make use of a variety of forms throughout his ministry.¹⁶

Blast From the Past

It is always good to learn from preachers of the past and to understand how they preached. Looking throughout church history it appears clear that the Lord has greatly blessed a variety of different models of expositional preaching.¹⁷

John Calvin (1509–1564) was known to largely preach using the *lectio continua* model of expositional

¹⁵ See Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1977), 84ff.

¹⁶ See also Jay E. Adams, *Preaching with Purpose: The Urgent Task of Homiletics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 21–23.

¹⁷ This is necessarily abbreviated and reductionistic. For a very thorough history of preaching see Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, 7 vols., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans).

preaching. It is said that after his exile he began preaching in the book of Acts at the exact spot where he had left off. Calvin's preaching was greatly blessed by the Lord and we still profit from his written sermons.

The Puritans (c. 17–19th century) were a mixed bag of preachers. Some preachers used the *lectio continua* form of expositional preaching. Joseph Caryl preached over 420 sermons on the book of Job. Other Puritans preached thematically as the political climate or social circumstances of the day necessitated. Other Puritans would preach heads of systematic theology. Other times they were known to preach themes such as the Lord's Supper, or baptism. Other times they addressed specific needs like procrastination, stewardship, or time management. The Puritans faithfully ministered the Word using a variety of models of expositional preaching.

George Whitefield (1714–1770) was a revivalist preacher who is thought to have only written a handful of sermons throughout his tenure as an itinerant preacher, and yet his ministry reached tens of thousands of people for the Gospel of Christ.

Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892) is known as the Prince of Preachers for his uncommon ability to preach Christ. While Spurgeon's exegesis was a bit dubious at times, none can deny that this man was powerfully used by God throughout England, and even the world—his sermons fill 63 volumes. Spurgeon never preached using the *lectio continua* model of preaching. He chose new texts each week in which to set forth Jesus Christ.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981) is heralded by many as the greatest preacher of the 20th century. Lloyd-Jones was known for his meticulous verse by verse exposition of Romans which was over 350 sermons. Lloyd-Jones also preached series, or other times smaller portions of a book. His well-known sermons on the Sermon on the Mount exemplify this. Lloyd-Jones never preached using the *lectio continua* through an entire Gospel.

A brief look at history encourages all of us to be humble when speaking on the different models of expositional preaching. The Lord has given his ministers various gifts and there appears to be room for more than one model. Again, what made these mens' ministries and preaching so powerful and effective wasn't primarily the *form* of their preaching, but the content of their preaching: Jesus Christ.

THE PREACHER

While preaching is God's command and God's message to his people, we must always remember that God uses *men* to preach his Word. An important dynamic to preaching is the man who preaches. And it is helpful to look at several aspects on the preacher.

Saddle Up

It is important to remember that preaching is more than communication. Preaching is most fundamentally a gift from the Lord (cf. Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). For this reason, it is important that a man is qualified for this particular office. While the Bible covers the qualifications for an elder in 1 Timothy 3:1–7, Titus 1:5–9, and 1 Peter 5:1–4, we will focus primarily on the WLC Q&A 158–159 as they summarize our understanding of the Biblical qualifications:

- WLC 158: *“By whom is the Word of God to be preached? The Word of God is to be preached only by such as are sufficiently gifted, and also duly approved and called to that office.”* This Q&A rightly teaches us *who* may preach God's Word. You see in the answer that the catechism connects preaching to a gift and office. In order to discern whether one has this gift, they must be “duly approved and called.” The catechism's language of “duly approved” flows from Paul's words in 2 Timothy 2:15 that Timothy was to study to show himself approved. There is a standard of education the preacher must meet to show himself approved. This is why the OPC has a number

of exams that men must pass before they are licensed to preach, and more exams before they are ordained and installed to the preaching ministry.

Beyond studying, the catechism also notes they must be “called.” We often speak of this as the external call. It is not sufficient for a man to believe he ought to preach. Because this gift is a public gift given for the building up of the church, it is imperative that the church recognizes this gift in a man. Without the external call no man can be a preacher.

- WLC 159: *“How is the Word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto? They that are called to labor in the ministry of the word, are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season and out of season; plainly, not in the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God; wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers; zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.* This Q&A teaches us *how* God's Word is to be preached by those who are duly gifted and called. While there is much in this answer worth discussing, there are a few particulars that surface. First, they “are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season and out of season.” Notice the *diligence*. Sermon preparation is not a Saturday afternoon affair. Neither is it something that is secondary or tertiary to the preacher's calling. The preaching of the Word is

the most important aspect of his ministry. He is called to *diligently* prepare each sermon.

Further he is to preach “plainly, not in the enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power.” Preaching is not about making sure everyone knows how intelligent or studied the minister is. Neither is it to always be referencing the Hebrew and the Greek. It is likely that we've all experienced ministers who like to take us through the exegetical museum of wonders, but seldom is that beneficial. Further, preaching is not professional speaking or public oration. True biblical preaching is intentionally plain so that it can be understood in simplicity. The aim is to make the glorious truths of God understood by all.

Lastly, the preacher must “wisely, [apply] themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers; zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of his people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.” Much can be said about these final statements. Notice the *knowledge* preachers must have, not only of God, but also of their hearers. The preacher's greatest concern is the “souls of his people” and their “salvation.” While congregants have many different people to look after their physical well-being, the preacher's primary concern is with the health of their soul. He is not a life coach, a cheerleader, a finance advisor, or medical doctor—but a shepherd of souls. Lastly, he must be concerned for the abilities of his people. Not all ministers are gifted to the same capacity. What's benefi-

cial for one congregation may not be beneficial for another congregation. Ministers must accommodate themselves, to a certain degree, to the strengths and weaknesses of their specific congregation as is fitting in the Lord.

Putting Preferences in Perspective

Confronting every congregant, elder, and preacher are the various preferences on preaching that individuals have. There are as many preferences as there are congregants. Preferences have often been the downfall of ministries, preachers, and churches. When individuals believe that a preacher must conform to his or her every whim and preference (or the vast majority), preaching can become a tedious and tenuous calling. Because preferences are so prevalent, it is important to be aware of them and address them.

First, we ought to always remember that a preference is just that, a preference. Despite our best efforts, preferences can never have moral value. It is one thing to believe that a preacher isn't preaching truth. It is another thing to not prefer his style of delivery, his clothes, his tone of voice, his poor grammar, or even the length of his sermon. Preferences ought to be reigned-in with great humility and ought never to be the litmus test by which we judge the fruitfulness of one's ministry.

Second, remember the danger preferences can create. Whenever the church divides or factions leave, it is always lamentable. We ought to always understand that our preferences have the power to divide or unite. In keeping

with a Christian ethic of self-sacrifice it is almost always best to defer to the preferences of others (cf. Phil. 2:1–11). Those who are too outspoken or forceful with their preferences foster a church culture of divisiveness. Further, we ought to exercise caution that we don't attempt to find a church that feeds all of our preferences. If we choose a church based on our personal preferences rather than faithfulness to the ordinary means of grace, we are setting ourselves up for trouble.

Third, we ought to admit that while some preferences are important, the vast majority of preferences are very inconsequential. There is no strict condemnation in the Bible of a power point that spells immediate and inevitable ruin for a church. There is no strict command that a preacher must hand out an outline in the bulletin, or even title his sermon. There is no divine declaration that the preacher must preach a specific model of expositional preaching. Most of our preferences are completely tertiary and inconsequential to the fidelity of the church.

Fourth, it is important to remember that as it pertains to the preaching ministry of the church, the preacher's preferences are probably the most important. Regardless of the issue at hand, we must remember that our preachers will stand before God one day and give an account for their ministries, what they did, how they did it, and why they did it. Preachers are typically men of conviction and men of preferences. Due weight ought to be given to them, as they have been called, entrusted with, and will give account for their ministries one day.

All About the Style

Most are driven, more than we care to admit, by *style*. We have different styles of music, dress, food, entertainment, culture, etc. Our lives are largely defined by our *styles*. It is true that when an individual disagrees with my particular style it can make it difficult to get along. Style is very important to the majority of us.

When it comes to the preacher it is important to note that he has his own style. One old minister said that preaching is nothing but “exposition through personality.” In classes on preaching there appear to be as many styles as there are personalities! We often judge a man's preaching more by his style than by his content. How do we address this problem to which most of us are susceptible?

First, it is important that we recognize that there is no *one* style of preaching that is commendable or acceptable to God. Make no mistake, truth never changes. But the way in which that truth is expressed does. We are not to be so captivated or turned off by a style that we let that hinder us from seeing Christ set forth in the preaching of the Word.

Second, it is important to remember that just as there are many different styles of preachers, there are just as many styles of listeners. This truth ought to encourage preachers to stretch themselves from time to time in order to faithfully reach out to the various types of people in their congregation. Some people love a “hell fire and brimstone” style of preaching. Others are turned off by it. Some people flourish greatly under a deluge of theological points in a sermon. Still others can't handle too much

truth in any given sermon. Some people love illustrations as it helps them understand spiritual truths. Others think illustrations are a waste of time. The faithful preacher will keep all of this in mind and attempt, to the best of his ability, to accommodate where he can, so long as he communicates the truth of the given text.

Third, it is important to remember that “the best of men are men at best.” No preacher, besides Jesus, has been anointed beyond measure with the Holy Spirit. Every minister is fallible and bears his weaknesses every time he preaches. The sovereign Spirit has not determined to give all men the same abilities or gifts for preaching. This calls for immense humility on the part of the preacher. He needs to know his own limitations, strengths, weaknesses, and abilities. He needs to be sober-minded about himself. It also calls for immense humility on the part of the people. The congregation needs to understand that their preacher is gifted in some areas and not gifted in other areas. I have heard amazing and very gifted ministers preach terrible sermons through particular books—not because of sin in them, but a lack of giftedness in digesting and setting Christ forth through different genres.

Fourth, be thankful that your preacher doesn't always match your style. Preaching is far less about meeting our personal preferences than it is about beholding Jesus Christ through the varied gifts of the Lord's ministers. An old and well-known preaching story highlights this truth. It is said that in the 17th century an English merchant had the chance to visit Scotland. He later recounted his experiences in the churches of Scotland: “When I went to St. Andrews I heard a sweet, majestic-looking man, and he

showed me the majesty of God. After him I heard a little fair man, and he showed me the loveliness of Christ. I then went to Irvine, where I heard a well-favored, proper old man with a long beard, and that man showed me all my own heart.” The majestic man was Robert Blair, the little fair man was Samuel Rutherford, and the proper old man was David Dickson. We can thank the Lord that there are men who draw the souls of God's people to the beauty of Christ, others who show the weight of Christ's majesty, others who bear forth the holiness of Christ, and still others who manifest the glory of Christ. We ought to praise God for the various gifts he has given to his ministers.

THE PEOPLE

Preaching isn't simply a discipline for the preacher, but the effectualness of preaching is largely dependent on the people who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, listen to the preaching of the Word of God. The following section will detail some important aspects about the people as it relates to preaching.

Be Careful Little Ears *How* You Hear

Many of us remember the little children's rhyme: "Be careful little ears what you hear." Children sing this as a reminder that what goes into our ears is often what comes out of our mouths. We need to guard carefully *what* we hear. When it comes to preaching it is not only important to be careful *what* you hear, but it is also important to be careful *how* you hear. The *how* can often drive the *what*.

There's a well-known story about the Scottish minister Ebenezer Erskine. One Lord's Day a woman visited his church and heard him preach. His preaching left such a profound impression on her, she resolved to again attend the following week. As she returned, she did not sense the same power and authority she had experienced the previous week. She went to Erskine and lamented that his preaching had lacked unction and power, and she had not been affected by it. Erskine responded: "Ah! Madam. The first Sabbath you came to meet the Lord Jesus Christ, and you had a blessing; but the second Sabbath you came to hear Ebenezer Erskine, and you had no blessing, and you had no right to expect any." When we aren't prepared to receive the preaching of God's Word as it is, *the Word*

of God and not of men (cf. 1 Thess. 2:13), we cannot expect any blessing. Much like this woman, we can lose the duty of diligence in our listening to the preaching of God's Word.

The Westminster Standards spend more time detailing how we *listen* than how the preacher is to *preach*.¹⁸ In dealing with the effectual means of grace (preaching, sacraments, and prayer), the WSC Q&A 90 asks: “How is the word to be read and heard, that it may become effectual to salvation?”¹⁹ The answer identifies three primary ways we are to listen to the preaching of God's Word.

- *Attending*: The first step in hearing the preaching of God's Word in a manner that it is effectual deals with our attending upon his Word. The catechism says: “We must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation and prayer.” Clearly the first step in *how* we hear is to make sure that we hear. The preaching of God's Word won't be effectual if we are not faithful in our attendance upon it. Sometimes people like to ask: “How often do I have to attend worship?” Some people consider faithful attendance to be once or twice a year, others a couple times a month, others are faithful to attend every worship service. I think the simple answer is that whenever God calls his people to worship members of a particular local church have the *duty* to be there. So we must *attend*. If you are an occasional attender, the ministry of the Word likely bears little fruit in your life.

18 See Gregory E. Reynolds, “Hearing the Word in the Modern World, Part 1 and Part 2,” in *Ordained Servant* accessed at: www.opc.org/os.html?article_ia=198.

19 See WLC Q&A 160 for a more thorough description.

But attendance isn't the only part of *attending* on the preaching of God's Word. Just as importantly the catechism admonishes us to “preparation and prayer.” Long before you come to hear the preaching of the Word, you are beginning to prepare yourself. We are to prepare our hearts and minds to come and hear the Word of God. One contemporary preacher wrote that we often spend more time preparing ourselves in the presence of a mirror than we do in the presence of God's Word. Sunday mornings and evenings can be hectic, but we have a *need* to prepare our hearts and minds through the spiritual discipline of prayer. Our listening is an act of worship to God and we need the Holy Spirit to give us grace to hear how we ought (see Rev. 2:29).

- *Receiving*: We must also have an appropriate attitude when we hear the Word of God preached. I remember as a child I found it entertaining to take notes from the pastor's preaching. It wasn't so I could remember what he said or meditate on the passage later on, but my sole aim was to mark everything he said that I did not like with a large “DL” (meaning “dislike”). The catechism reminds us *how* we are to *receive* the Word: “With faith and love.” Receiving the Word with faith and love simply means that we are to receive the preaching of God's Word as it is, God's Word (see 1 Thess. 2:13). To receive God's Word in *faith* is not only hearing, but also *believing* what is being

preached.²⁰ Receiving the Word in *love* means we act upon the things we have heard and believe. We are to receive the preaching, not only with our minds but with our wills.

- *Applying*: Finally, the catechism rightly captures what we do *after* the preaching of the Word by saying: “Lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.” The preaching of the Word is a *means of grace*. Its effectualness is not tied to the time in which it is administered. We have a duty to meditate, think, and reflect upon the preaching of God's Word throughout the week. Some of our older fathers would speak of “improving upon the Word.” This isn't making improvements to what the preacher said, but bringing it to bear upon our minds and hearts throughout the course of the week.

When we speak of being careful *how* we hear, we see that the task of preaching is *not* simply the work of the preacher. The people have a great part to play, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in making the Word effectual unto salvation. It is imperative that if we want the long-lasting and abiding fruit of the Spirit in our lives that we be careful *how* we hear.

All My Bags Are Packed

One of the greatest impediments to listening to God's Word is the amount of *baggage* we bring with us. The baggage at times can be our wrong theological ideas and

²⁰ This does not mean we have an implicit faith in everything the minister says. We are to be Bereans (cf. Acts 17). But the general disposition of our heart ought to be to hear our ministers as those who have studied to show themselves approved and acknowledging that they are seeking to be faithful.

opinions, but even more so are our emotional trials. Imagine a scenario where a mother of many young toddlers has just spent the greater part of her week wiping snotty noses, running around the house, stumbling over messes, preparing food, cleaning up disasters, and breaking up fights while her husband has been in the Cayman Islands for work all week. As this young mother comes to hear the preaching of the Word, what baggage does she bring? Does she *want* to hear a sermon about faithful mothering? Or the need to worship the Lord in private? Or be convicted of the sin of anger? Not very likely! She wants to come and hear a sermon that will encourage her in the midst of her many failures and challenges.

But imagine another scenario where a young man has come into the church after skipping class all week, getting drunk on Friday night, and having wallowed in pornography on Saturday. This young man comes to church with a bunch of baggage. Perhaps it is guilt. Perhaps it is laziness. Perhaps it is a lack of conviction. Perhaps it is something else. Will he want to hear a convicting sermon? No. Should he hear a convicting sermon? Yes. This baggage will inevitably shape *what* he wants to hear and *how* he wants to hear it.

The scenarios could be multiplied. We are all psychological beings that bring our emotions with us. We all come with different experiences and out of different contexts, bearing different hurts and joys and expectations—this includes the preacher too! We all have mental, physical, and spiritual baggage when we hear sermons. All of this compounded can make the same sermon encouraging to one person and discouraging to another. To one it is

life-giving, to another it is depressing. To one it is needed, to another it appears unhelpful.

I wonder how often preachers hear the complaint: “That's just not what I needed this week (or month or year).” Perhaps God knows what you need *more* than you know what you need. To receive the Word in “faith and love” is to trust that your preacher has God's glory and your good in mind. The preacher has the responsibility to preach God's Word as God's Word, and that's despite the week you (or he) may have had. It is a shame when people allow their baggage to drive them *from* the preaching of God's Word rather than *to* the preaching of God's Word. We should all put our baggage into perspective, and earnestly seek to come undistracted to the preaching of God's Word.

There is No “I” in Preach

We live in a day when we customize everything. Our homes, furniture, cars, cell phones, computers, social media networks. Almost everything can be fashioned after my preferences and tastes. Too often we desire to customize the preaching of God's Word. Simply stated, we believe that the preaching of God's Word ought to revolve around *me*. One of our greatest sins in listening to the preaching of God's Word in *selfishness*, thinking that good preaching is ultimately determined by what *I* get out of it, how it affects *me*, whether it meets *my* preference, relates to *my* circumstances, or appeals to *my* likes. By nature we are *selfish* listeners.

We must remember there is no “I” in preach. Preaching is *not* an individual activity. It is a *corporate* act of worship. It is God calling his *people* to worship *him* and hear from *him* that *we* might glorify *him* in everything. We need to be careful that our rugged individualism is not brought into the corporate worship of God. Some things may not live up to *your* preference, but perhaps it is exactly what your brother or sister in Christ is needing at that exact moment.

This extends not only to the *content* of preaching, but also to the *application* of preaching. We can often want a particular text to address *my* situation. We want the preacher to assess *my* problems. We want him to access *my* thoughts, and that is what ought to drive the way *he* preaches—*me*. A common criticism that preachers hear is: “I wouldn't have preached it that way.” This particular criticism is unhelpful, because it highlights the listener's selfishness. The great burden of preaching doesn't rest solely in the hands of the preacher. Remember, the discipline of preaching has just as much to do with how well *you* attend, receive, and apply God's Word to your heart and life.²¹

21 For more on the congregation's place in preaching see Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 121ff.

THE PASSAGE

Now that we've laid down a theology of preaching as it concerns preaching, the preacher, and the people, it is helpful to conclude by making some final remarks on the passage. If the preaching is expositional then there are some fundamentals to keep in mind.

Context, Context, Context

One of the most consistent and well-known rules in interpreting the Bible is that context matters. It is easy to misunderstand a text if we lift it out of its context, from its particular chapter, book, canonical placement, or covenantal unfolding. It is imperative to understanding a text, to think through how it fits into the greater contexts that surround it.

The context of the passage is not the only context to consider. There is a context that is sometimes overlooked by both preachers and congregants—the context of the hearers. One contemporary pastor has stressed the need for the preacher to exegete not only the text, but to also exegete the hearts of his hearers.²² The goal of preaching is to bring the context of the passage into the contexts of the congregation. Some preachers prefer to define this as the “burden” of preaching.

Faithful preaching doesn't simply address the text, but it addresses the hearts of the people. Faithful preaching addresses the hopes, fears, pains, struggles, sins, anxieties, joys, and dreams of God's people with the truth of

²² See Daniel M. Dorinai, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R, 2001), 97ff.

God's Word. Preaching brings the *full* Christ to the *full* man. Therefore, we must allow for preaching that is at times cognitive (challenging our way of thinking), emotive (challenging our way of feeling), or volitional (challenging our way of acting). Not every sermon is the same because not every text has the same context. All preaching is not the same because the context of the congregation is not always the same.

Stories and Poems and Prophecies, O My!

The Bible is a wonderful book. It is filled with all the truth we need for life and godliness. The Bible is also a very *diverse* book. It expresses the same truth in a variety of ways. In literature different writing styles are called genres. From a literary perspective, the Bible is comprised of many different genres. Think about all the different genres in the Bible. There's historical narrative, poetry, prophecies, didactic, and apocalyptic. Even our major genres are broken down into sub-genres of proverbs, parables, polemics, etc. From one perspective, the Bible is a diverse literary masterpiece.

Why is this important when it comes to preaching? Because preaching that seeks to do justice to the context of the passage will also do justice to the genre it is preaching. Different genres often require different approaches to preaching. When preaching Paul's letters, the preacher must pay careful attention to the logical flow of the passage, the importance of prepositions, the significance of "if/then" statements, etc. On the other hand, when preaching the Gospels there isn't as much of a need

to pay attention to the grammatical issues or logical flow. Gospel passages can be preached more thematically or illustratively—perhaps an indication why great expositional preachers like Martyn Lloyd-Jones never preached the *lectio continua* through a full gospel! Similarly when it comes to the Proverbs, little attention needs to be paid to the immediate context and the way in which each proverb fits within the chapter. The Proverbs often lack a clear inner consistency or flow, but can easily be preached as standalone sermons, or preached thematically organizing many different proverbs of the same theme together. Of course the list and contrasts could go on. No two genres in the Bible ought to be preached in the exact same way. The preacher is not only to highlight the meaning of the text, but be faithful to the genre in which the text is found.

There is a need in preaching to appreciate the variety of genres in the magnificent diversity of the Bible and this will inevitably influence *how* a particular text is preached.

Mood Swings

The Bible often expresses truth to us in *emotive* language. One cannot read of David's repentance in Psalm 51 and not feel the depths of his anguish and pain. Similarly, one cannot read the triumph of Romans 8 and not feel invigorated by the glorious assurance that flows from almost every verse. Neither could we hear a sustained sermon series on Lamentations and not feel the depth of grief and sadness in Jeremiah's and our own hearts for the spoiling of grace. It is just as appropriate to tremble at a

stern warning or a rebuke from passages like Matthew 23 or Hebrews 6, as it is appropriate to rejoice in the glories of heaven and the power of grace from passages like Romans 6. Likewise, many of the stories in the Bible are written in such a way that we ought to feel the tension of the narrative as it progresses towards the climax and moves to the resolution. The Bible is filled with all manner of *moods*.

It is imperative that the preacher and the people attempt to grasp the *mood* of the passage as best they can. This mood is *not* some subjective interpretation or sentimentalism imposed on the text for the sake of emotionalism. Rather it is a mood that is discerned by the context, grammar, logic, and flow of any given passage. It is meant to be communicated in the preaching.

The WCF reminds us that saving faith acts differently upon different passages: “Yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come” (WCF 14.2). The confession rightly states that reading and preaching God's Word is meant to be *affectionate*. That is, the Bible demands an emotional, a volitional, and cognitive response that is appropriate to the chosen text. Saving faith is meant to receive and act upon any given text (preached or read) in a manner that is fitting to that particular text.

The preacher must bear this in mind when he preaches. By the help of the Holy Spirit he must communicate the *mood* of the given text while the people need to re-

ceive the Word of God, ready for it to bear upon their affections—not just their intellect and wills.²³

Time is of the Essence

You have heard it said many times: “We live in a sound byte world.” People are becoming increasingly incapable of listening beyond your average YouTube clip. We have become less and less auditory and more and more visual. This has had ramifications in our society—not the least of which is in our churches. This sound byte world, we are told, has challenged the length of worship services, particularly the preaching of God's Word. Do people want longer or shorter sermons? The answer appears to be “Yes,” to both.²⁴ How, therefore, do we understand the appropriate length of a sermon? Perhaps a couple of suggestions will be helpful.

First, we must realize that some texts demand more explanation. Preaching expositionally requires a concern for explaining the text. If the preacher uses a lengthy text (think especially of a narrative or prophecy), it is likely that much of the sermon must be spent explaining the text in context. One contemporary and well-known expositional preacher has said that it is impossible to preach an expositional sermon in 25–30 minutes. Add to this the context of the congregation, and sermon lengths can easily go into the 40 minute range.

Second, there's a biblical precedence for long sermons. In the days of Ezra and Nehemiah the people of Ju-

²³ See Josh Moody and Robin Weekes, *Burning Hearts: Preaching to the Affections* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2014).

²⁴ For a relatively unofficial yet helpful analysis, see Thomas S. Rainer, “Three Views on How Long a Sermon Should Be” accessed at: thomrainer.com/2014/07/three-views-long-sermon/.

dah stood listening all morning to the reading and expositing of the law (see Nehemiah 8). Further, Jesus often preached to the crowds even when his disciples urged him to send the people away before it got too late (see Mark 6). Even Paul was known to preach long as the well-known story of Eutychus shows (see Acts 20).

Third, while there is a precedence to preach long, it is also true that some use this as an excuse to weary their congregation. It is important that we all remember a long sermon is not inherently more pious or more spiritual than a shorter sermon (see Acts 2 and 7 for examples of powerful short sermons).

Fourth, preaching has never been, from a human perspective, the most efficient means of sharing the Gospel. In the parable of the sower from Matthew 13 it is instructive (though we don't want to be too literalistic) that $\frac{3}{4}$ of the seed that was sown doesn't produce lasting fruit through the preaching of the Word. And the $\frac{1}{4}$ that does produce fruit was varied in its fruitfulness. We must always remember that preaching is the means God has chosen for the gathering and perfecting of his saints.

Fifth, time is ultimately a preference. And preferences are governed by opinions. Preachers ought to keep the majority of their congregation in mind and the congregation must keep in mind that they are not the only ones benefiting from the preaching of the Word. Long or short, be encouraged that your preacher is attempting to remain faithful to the calling God has given him, he is loving Christ by feeding you the Word, and he is seeking your encouragement and your growth in the faith. The preacher

labors over a text all week long to bring out precious and wonderful truths for you to meditate on—and few, if any preachers, try to weary you with their preaching. Charles Spurgeon taught his students that the way to preach is to hold the attention of the congregation, and as long as you have that, you have all the time in the world.

Aim at Nothing, Hit Nothing

One of the greatest temptations in preaching is to *not* apply the text. One main reason is because application is where people get most offended. Think of the parable that Nathan the prophet spoke to David in 2 Samuel 12. David was all ears and even emotionally affected by Nathan's parable. Yet, it was with some fear and trepidation that in v. 7 Nathan looked at David and said: “You are the man!” Why? Because David was the king. And he could have had Nathan killed without a second thought.

A similar attitude pervades many churches today. In our sin and rebellion we may want to know what a passage says but often resist hearing what it says about *me*, or my sin. By nature we all enjoy keeping the searchlight of God's Word at an arm's length from our souls. It is generally over *applications* that congregants pack their bags. It is when their pride or self-righteousness is wounded that they recoil. In light of all this, the subtle temptation for many preachers is to *aim* at nothing so they don't *hit* anything.

But God's Word is meant to be *applied* (2 Tim. 3:16). And it is meant to *divide* (Heb. 4:12). Preaching is meant to aim squarely at our minds and hearts, in order to un-

cover sin and point our faith to Jesus Christ. In order to have this full effect, it is important that preaching has a healthy diet of application.

When eating a meal one doesn't simply eat what is appealing to the tastebuds—this will inevitably result in malnourishment and poor health. A healthy diet considers what is useful to the health of the body. It takes into account portion sizes, variety of foods, the times in which we eat, etc. Similarly, a healthy diet of preaching will take into account different applications. Not every sermon can leave us feeling warm. Sometimes we need conviction. Not every sermon should warn us against the dangers of hell. We need a healthy dose of hope. Not every sermon can rest in justification by faith alone. We need exhortations to live holy lives. Not every sermon can comfort us in our troubles. There are times when we need to be afflicted. Not every sermon should encourage us. Sometimes we need to be discouraged by the way we are living. Not every sermon can hold the condemning power of the law over our heads. Sometimes (often!) we need to be reminded that Jesus came to die for the sins of his people, and grace abounds. God's people need the full counsel of God brought to bear upon the fullness of their lives. This will require a variety of applications over time.²⁵

Preaching is not meant to aim at nothing. By the power and work of the Holy Spirit, it is aimed at our minds, hearts, volitions, and affections. Biblical preaching seeks to *apply* the text of God's Word to the hearts of God's people.

²⁵ See James M. Garretson, *An Able and Faithful Ministry: Samuel Miller and the Pastoral Office* (Grand Rapids, MI: RHB, 2014), 242–43. See also David Murray, *How Sermons Work* (Faverdale North: EP Books, 2011), chp. 4.

