

PASTORS

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Principles of expository preaching, text selection, sermon structure, creativity, delivery, and the discipline of the teaching pastor

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Equipping pastors and leaders to serve with excellence, integrity, and lasting Kingdom impact.

The Theology of Preaching: Why the Word Must Be Taught

Preaching is not a delivery mechanism for spiritual content. It is an event. Something happens when the Word of God is opened, read aloud, and faithfully expounded in the gathered community. Paul does not merely say that Scripture is useful for teaching -- he says it is "breathed out by God" (theopneustos, 2 Timothy 3:16). The image is of a living text that carries its Author's breath, and when that text is read aloud in the assembly, God speaks. The preacher is not giving a TED Talk on spiritual themes. He is standing in the ancient tradition of Moses reading the law, Ezra opening the book, Isaiah declaring the Lord's word, and Paul reasoning from the Scriptures. When the preacher opens the Bible and says, "This is what God says," and then explains it faithfully, the Holy Spirit takes the spoken word and accomplishes what only God can accomplish in the human heart.

"Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions."

-- 2 Timothy 4:2-3

Paul's charge to Timothy -- preach the word -- is the pastoral commission for every generation. Not "preach about spiritual topics." Not "create engaging experiences around biblical themes." Preach the word. Let the text set the agenda. The word itself carries authority that no human personality, however gifted, can generate independently. The congregation that is consistently fed the word of God will develop a different kind of spiritual resilience than the congregation fed primarily on the pastor's personality or the motivational currency of the moment.

The modern church faces an unprecedented temptation in this area. The technological infrastructure of contemporary ministry -- the lighting rigs, the production values, the sermon series branding, the social media presence -- creates an enormous gravitational pull toward entertainment, toward relatability, toward the kind of preaching that generates immediate positive feedback. None of these things are inherently wrong. The preacher should be a skilled communicator. He should care about clarity and engagement. But the moment the preaching is shaped more by what people want to hear than by what the text actually says, the whole enterprise has been corrupted at its root.

Richard Baxter's warning from the 17th century has not aged: "I preach as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men." The preacher who approaches the pulpit with that kind of gravity -- the gravity of eternity, the weight of souls, the awareness that the gospel he preaches is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16) -- will preach very differently than the preacher who is primarily trying to satisfy a Sunday morning audience.

Expository Preaching: What It Is and What It Is Not

The term "expository preaching" is used loosely and is sometimes misunderstood in both directions. Some equate expository preaching with long, verse-by-verse sloggng through a text with extensive linguistic commentary -- a lecture format that produces knowledge but not necessarily transformation. Others dismiss it as an outdated academic approach unsuited to contemporary audiences. Both caricatures miss the point.

Expository preaching, properly understood, is simply preaching that exposes what the text says, and then explains, applies, and proclaims it. The structure of the sermon flows from the structure of the passage. The main idea of the sermon is the main idea of the text. The application arises from what the text was doing in its original context and what that same truth requires in the congregation's current context. This definition is compatible with a wide range of formats, lengths, styles, and delivery approaches. You can preach expositionally through a verse, a paragraph, a chapter, a book, or a theological theme traced through multiple texts. What makes it expository is not the format but the orientation: the text drives everything.

Why Expository Preaching Serves the Congregation

First, it submits the preacher's agenda to the text's agenda. Left to our own devices, most preachers return repeatedly to their favorite themes, their most compelling stories, their theological hobby horses, and the topics they find personally energizing. A commitment to expository preaching through books of the Bible forces the preacher to engage texts he would not naturally choose -- texts that challenge him, embarrass him, confuse him, and expand him. And the congregation benefits accordingly.

Second, it provides a systematic diet of the whole counsel of God. Acts 20:27 records Paul's extraordinary claim at the end of his Ephesian ministry: "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God." This is a staggering pastoral ambition. Not just the comfortable parts. Not just the parts that suit the current cultural moment or the congregation's felt needs. The whole counsel. Preaching through entire books of the Bible is one of the surest ways to ensure that the congregation encounters the full range of biblical truth.

Third, it builds the congregation's biblical literacy and independent engagement with Scripture. When the preacher models every week how to read a text carefully -- observing what it says, understanding its context, identifying its main point, drawing out its implications -- the congregation gradually develops those same skills. The congregation becomes more Berean (Acts 17:11), more capable of evaluating teaching, more confident in opening the Bible for themselves.

The Work of Sermon Preparation

There is no substitute for the work. The preacher who arrives at Sunday consistently underprepared will find that, however gifted his communication instincts, his preaching gradually loses depth, conviction, and the specific pastoral insight that only comes from sustained wrestling with the text. Sermon preparation is not a preliminary to the real work of ministry. It is itself the most important work of the week.

How much time? The pastoral literature ranges from 1 hour per minute of sermon (suggesting 30-45 hours for a 30-45 minute message) to more modest estimates of 15-20 hours for a thoroughly prepared message. The right answer for your context will depend on your experience level, your natural gifts, and the expectations of your congregation. But the direction is clear: more preparation produces better preaching, and most pastors under-invest in this area.

Stage 1: Immersion in the Text

Begin by reading the text repeatedly in your primary English translation -- not to analyze it, but to inhabit it. Read it aloud. Read it in different translations (ESV, NIV, NRSV, NLT, The Message). Note what strikes you, surprises you, confuses you, or challenges you. Before you open a single commentary, spend time with the text itself. The observations you make in this phase -- before you have been influenced by any scholarly opinion -- are often the most fresh and the most preachable.

Write out your observations as free-form notes: What does the text say? What does it not say? What words are repeated? What structure does it follow (narrative, argument, lament, instruction, apocalyptic)? What tensions or questions does it raise? What would the original audience have heard? What does the text demand of its reader?

Stage 2: Exegetical Investigation

If you have Greek or Hebrew training, work through the text in the original language at this stage. If not, use tools like Strong's Concordance, BDAG (for Greek), BDB (for Hebrew), or Bible software (Logos, Accordance, Olive Tree) to investigate key words. Pay particular attention to words that: (1) are theologically significant, (2) have a different range of meaning than the English translation suggests, (3) appear multiple times in the passage, or (4) connect the passage to other important biblical texts.

Investigate the historical and cultural background of the text. Who wrote it? To whom? In what circumstances? What would the original audience have understood that we might miss? What cultural assumptions are embedded in the text? Good commentaries (see the recommended list at the end of this volume) will help here, but do not rely on commentaries as a substitute for this investigation. The commentary confirms and refines your research; it does not replace it.

Stage 3: Identifying the Big Idea

Every text has a main point -- one central claim about God, humanity, salvation, or the Christian life. Finding it is the most important work in sermon preparation. Haddon Robinson called it the "exegetical idea" -- the author's main proposition expressed in a single sentence. Once you have identified it, test it: Does this sentence accurately summarize what the entire passage is doing? Would the original author recognize this as his point? Does this idea, if believed and acted upon, produce the change the text is calling for?

The main point of the sermon should be identical to the main point of the text. This is the cardinal rule of expository preaching. When the sermon's central claim diverges from the text's central claim -- even if the sermon's claim is true and biblical -- you have left the realm of exposition and entered the realm of illustration or topic selection. Neither is necessarily wrong, but they should not be confused with expository preaching.

Stage 4: Building the Sermon Structure

A good sermon structure is not an outline imposed on the text but a structure drawn from the text. If the text is a narrative, the structure might follow the narrative's arc. If the text is a theological argument (as in Romans or Galatians), the structure might follow the argument's logic. If the text is a poem (as in the Psalms), the structure might reflect the poem's movements. The goal is for the listener to experience the shape of the text, not just receive information extracted from it.

Regardless of structure, every effective sermon moves through three essential stages: exposition (what does the text say and mean?), argumentation (why should I believe this?), and application (what does this require of me?). The proportions will vary by passage and congregation, but all three must be present. A sermon that only expounds without applying is a lecture. A sermon that only applies without expounding lacks authority. A sermon that only argues without applying is philosophy.

Stage 5: Illustrations, Introduction, and Conclusion

Illustrations are windows that let light into the house of a theological concept. A great illustration does not entertain -- it illuminates. It makes the abstract concrete, the distant near, the incomprehensible recognizable. The best illustrations come from three sources: life (personal experience and observation), culture (film, literature, news, history), and Scripture itself (using one biblical text to illuminate another). Use each source regularly to avoid the narrowness of always preaching only from personal experience.

The introduction has one job: to create a need for what the text provides. It should raise a question the text answers, create a tension the text resolves, or name a problem the text addresses. The congregation should finish the introduction thinking, "I need to hear this." The conclusion has one job: to drive home the main point and call for a response. It should not introduce new material. It should focus everything that has preceded it onto one sharp, clear call to believe, repent, trust, obey, or hope.

Preaching With Power: Delivery, Voice, and the Spirit

All the preparation in the world is incomplete until the sermon is preached. Delivery matters. Not because preaching is performance -- it is not -- but because the preacher is a human being communicating to human beings, and the how of communication affects the what. A brilliant manuscript delivered in a monotone, with eyes glued to the page, in a posture that communicates defeat, will accomplish less than a moderately developed message delivered with genuine conviction, pastoral warmth, and the kind of authority that comes from someone who has actually wrestled with God and emerged changed.

The Relationship Between the Preacher and the Text

The most important delivery question is not technical -- it is theological. Has the text first preached to you? Has it confronted you, convicted you, comforted you, or challenged you before you stood to preach it to others? The preacher who stands to deliver a message that has not first cost him something is, in some sense, a secondhand preacher -- passing along truth he has received academically but not metabolized experientially. The congregation can feel the difference, even if they cannot articulate it.

The great preachers of every generation describe a moment in sermon preparation -- sometimes early, sometimes agonizingly late -- when the text breaks through from intellectual engagement to personal encounter. When it stops being a passage to exegete and becomes a word from God to the preacher himself. Protect this moment. Do not rush through it to get to the manuscript. Sit in it. Let it do its work. And then preach from the other side of it.

Manuscript, Outline, or Memorization?

There is no single right answer to the question of how much to write out and how much to memorize. Full manuscripts have the advantage of precision -- every word has been chosen, every transition has been crafted. The disadvantage is the tendency to read rather than preach, which creates distance between the preacher and the congregation. Detailed outlines with key sentences written out provide structure with more flexibility. Memorized manuscripts combine the precision of full preparation with the freedom of extemporaneous delivery but require the most preparation time. Simple outlines with bullet points are the most flexible and spontaneous but risk underdeveloped arguments and missed applications.

The best approach for most preachers is thorough manuscript preparation (writing out the full text or at least detailed notes) followed by delivery from a brief outline or notes that trigger memory rather than replace it. This approach maximizes both preparation and connection. You have thought through every major move; you are not imprisoned by every word.

Preaching Through Entire Books of the Bible

One of the most fruitful practices a pastor can establish is systematic, book-by-book preaching through the canon of Scripture. Over a pastoral career of 30-40 years, a pastor who regularly preaches through books can cover much of the Bible in depth. The congregation that has been led through Genesis, Psalms, Isaiah, Matthew, John, Romans, Galatians, Hebrews, and Revelation by a faithful pastor over a decade has received a theological education that no seminary could fully match.

Book-by-book preaching is particularly powerful for its cumulative effect. Week by week, the congregation becomes increasingly familiar with the world of the text -- the characters, the theological themes, the narrative arc, the specific language and imagery. By the third week of a series in Ephesians, the congregation hears "in the heavenly places" and immediately accesses the rich theological geography Paul has been building. By the eighth week of a series in John, the signs and the "I am" sayings have woven themselves into the congregation's spiritual vocabulary in ways that a single Sunday on any one of these passages could never accomplish.

Selecting Your Preaching Program

A healthy preaching program over a year might include: one or two extended series (8-20 weeks) through a single book or major section of a book; two or three shorter series (4-6 weeks) on significant themes traced through multiple texts; occasional single sermons that address specific pastoral needs, calendar moments (Easter, Advent, Pentecost), or cultural events that demand a prophetic word; and the regular rhythm of the church year, which provides its own narrative arc from Advent through Ordinary Time.

Annual sermon planning -- ideally done 6-12 months in advance -- provides the infrastructure for excellent preaching. When you know in January where you will be in October, you begin subconsciously collecting illustrations, noting connections, and accumulating pastoral observations that make October's preaching richer than anything you could produce with a week's preparation. The annual preaching calendar is one of the most significant organizational investments a pastor can make.

Difficult Texts and the Courage to Preach Them

The commitment to preach "the whole counsel of God" will eventually bring the pastor to texts that are uncomfortable, controversial, culturally explosive, or personally difficult. The divine wrath texts of the Old Testament. The texts on gender, sexuality, and marriage that run contrary to prevailing cultural assumptions. The imprecatory psalms. The apocalyptic judgments of Revelation. The demand for costly discipleship in the Gospels. The passages on money, generosity, and simplicity that most affluent Western congregations would prefer to avoid.

The pastor who develops a habit of skipping or softening these texts to preserve comfort and avoid controversy is not being kind to his congregation. He is robbing them of the full word of God. He is also training them to expect a Christianity of their own design -- a religion that confirms their preferences rather than transforming them. The preacher who handles all of Scripture with equal courage, equal care, and equal pastoral love builds a congregation of extraordinary theological depth and spiritual resilience.

KEY PRINCIPLE

Preach the text you have in front of you, not the text you wish was there. The difficult texts are difficult because they are true in ways that are costly to receive. Handle them with care, but handle them. The congregation deserves the full Scripture.

Evaluating Your Preaching

Every preacher should have a regular evaluation practice. Without feedback, growth is largely accidental. The following practices are used by excellent preachers across a wide range of traditions: recording every sermon (audio or video) and reviewing it critically; an annual review with a trusted mentor or colleague who can give honest feedback; soliciting specific feedback from a small group of trusted lay listeners; tracking themes, passages, and application challenges over time to identify gaps and patterns.

When you review your preaching, evaluate it against these questions: Was the main point of the sermon the main point of the text? Did the introduction create genuine need? Was the argumentation clear and compelling? Were the illustrations illuminating rather than merely entertaining? Was the application specific and actionable? Was the conclusion focused and strong? Did this message call for a response, and was the response defined clearly?

Reflection Questions for the Teaching Pastor

1. How would you describe your current approach to sermon preparation? What is your average weekly preparation time? What would need to change to give biblical study the time and priority it deserves?
2. When did the text most recently "preach to you" before you preached it to others? What was that experience like? How did it affect the sermon that came from it?
3. What books of the Bible have you never preached? What has prevented you from preaching them? What would it take to include them in your preaching calendar?
4. What are the "difficult texts" in your tradition -- the passages you tend to skip or soften? What theological or pastoral reasoning do you use to justify that approach? Is it convincing?
5. Who in your congregation is not being reached by your current preaching style? What adaptations could you make without compromising your commitment to biblical faithfulness?

The greatest privilege given to any human being is to stand before a gathered community, open the book, and say: "This is what God says." It is a privilege that carries weight -- the weight of eternity, the weight of souls, the weight of truth. Handle it with all the skill, all the preparation, and all the prayerful dependence you can bring. But handle it. The word of God never returns void.

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