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1

DEFINING A FAITHFUL SERMON

Would you embark on a vacation without first deciding where to go? I'm guessing no. If you don't know where you're headed, you won't know what to take with you or how to get there. What you'd pack for a February weekend in Chicago is far different than what you'd pack for a weekend in San Diego over the same time of year. You can't even punch an address into your GPS if you don't first determine your destination.

When my then girlfriend, now wife, Tami, attended college in downtown Chicago, I frequently visited her for the day and hung out by myself while she was in class. This was my first experience using the L-train system to get around. If you've never taken the L, trust me when I say that it's functional but no fun at all. It smells sort of like a urinal and feels like a cage. The problem for me was I never knew where I was or how to get anywhere. Every time Tami told me we had arrived at our stop, I would blast out of the doors in whatever direction I felt drawn toward, though I had no idea where we were going. Poor Tami was constantly calling me back from

my determined drudge in the wrong direction. You have to know where you're headed if you're to have any hope of arriving there.

The same is true of a sermon. If we don't start with a strong understanding of what constitutes a faithful sermon, we won't even know where to begin. Remember, our goal is not simply to write sermons faster; it's to write *faithful* sermons faster. We're not just trying to find a quicker way to throw something together for Sunday. As shepherds of God's flock (1 Peter 5:2), we are called to feed His sheep (John 21:15–17). This means that every week we should feel the burden of serving a healthy, life-giving meal to God's people. So before we embark on our journey, we need to determine our destination. If we hope to arrive at a faithful sermon, we need to know just what that is.

WHAT A FAITHFUL SERMON IS NOT

First, let's start by clarifying what a faithful sermon is *not*.

A faithful sermon is not merely commentary. A good commentary sheds light on the original meaning of a text. As a preacher, I'm thankful for good commentaries. As you'll see in the next chapter, I believe commentaries are critical tools for any pastor. A carpenter needs a solid hammer. A photographer needs a professional-grade camera. And a pastor needs good commentaries. They are essential to the process of faithful exegesis—that is, drawing out the original meaning of the text. The problem is that a commentary is not a sermon. If all you do each Sunday is stand up and explain what the text says, you're not doing the full work of faithful preaching. A faithful sermon is never less than explaining the text, but it is certainly more.

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A faithful sermon is not an inspirational talk. TED Talks have become hugely popular. If you're unfamiliar with this phenomenon, TED is "a nonprofit devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks (18 minutes or less)."¹ Started in 1984 as a conference where technology, education, and design converged, TED now hosts conferences all over the world, and their talks have been watched millions of times online. I've seen a number of TED Talks myself and have to say that every single one, regardless of the subject matter, has compelled and inspired me.

Many preachers have observed the success of TED and have sought to shape their sermons along the same lines. This isn't all bad. We have much to learn from any effective communicator or communication style. The problem lies in the fact that preachers aren't meant to be mere inspirational speakers. That's not to say a sermon should never be inspirational; in fact, it should be. The difference is that we don't rely on our rhetorical abilities or intellects to inspire change in people's hearts. The Spirit of God uses the Word of God to change the people of God. Preachers don't rely on their own gifts or the power of their good ideas. Preachers rely on God.

A faithful sermon is not self-help instruction. Peruse any Barnes & Noble bookstore and you will find the self-help section to be one of the—if not *the*—largest in the store. We all have a deep-seated feeling that something about us is broken. Hence our insatiable appetite for books, blogs, and seminars that promise us change and healing. The problem is that we can't self-help what's truly broken in us. Sure, we can change some rudimentary behaviors, but we can't redeem what's gone wrong in our hearts. If what we needed was something we

could do ourselves, then we would have no need for a Savior. This does not mean, however, that our sermons should not be helpful. The Bible is helpful. What we have to combat is the poisonous theology that says you and I, as well as those we have the privilege of preaching to each week, have the ability to transform ourselves. If your sermons “How to Have a Healthy Marriage” or “Five Ways to Better Manage God’s Money” are not steeped in the reality that we are powerless apart from the redeeming work of Christ and the empowering work of His Spirit, people may leave encouraged, but they won’t leave helped.

WHAT A FAITHFUL SERMON IS

Now, if a sermon is not a recapped commentary, an inspirational talk, or a self-help guide, what exactly constitutes a faithful sermon? While we could find many marks to categorize a faithful sermon, I’ll keep my list to five.

Saturated in Scripture

Paul tells Timothy, the young pastor at Ephesus, to “preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:2). The same call hangs over every pulpit today. Sadly, when we survey some of what constitutes “preaching” today, we find what might seem like everything but the Word of God. Many sermons today are filled with more pop psychology and sociological analysis than Scripture. Too many sound more like political stump speeches than proclamations of God’s authoritative Word. We must understand that there is absolutely no place in preaching for our own opinions, soapboxes, or political agendas. If you are a

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Christian preacher, make no mistake: you are called to preach God's Word.

There has been and will continue to be much debate around how best to carry out this call. The reason for the debate is that there are a number of ways to preach God's Word. I have a personal aversion to the "my-way-is-the-only-way" attitude. Unless explicitly stated in God's Word, we have to hold our preferences with an open hand. This is especially true when it comes to any discussion surrounding how to best preach the Word. The most frequent debate seems to be over topical versus expository preaching.

Topical preaching seeks to relay what the Bible says about any particular topic. The sermon is based on a simple question: "What does the Bible say about _____?" When done well, the sermon surveys what Scripture says about the topic, doctrine, or issue at hand.

Topical preaching has its strengths. First, it helps people see the consistency of God's Word. Second, it helps people understand the full scope of what God says about particular issues. Third, it helps preachers address particular areas of confusion, disbelief, disobedience, or biblical deficiency that may exist among their people. Crafting shorter series and covering a wide variety of topics over the course of a year can be especially helpful if the population one pastors is more transient in nature.

But topical preaching also has at least three liabilities. First, you may overlook a critical verse while discussing a particular topic. The Bible is a big book! Every time I preach a topical sermon, I fear I may miss a verse that sheds light on my topic. If we say only part of what God says, we risk skewing all of

what He says. Because the question topical preaching seeks to answer is, “What does the Bible say about _____?”, a great amount of time, effort, and care must be given to ensuring you can truly answer the question. That’s not to say it can’t be done. It just means you run the risk of missing something while trying to answer the question.

Second, you may preach only your pet topics. If I plan my preaching calendar around topics, I will be more inclined to select ones I want to address and less inclined to take on the ones I don’t want to address. Preachers are human. That means most of us don’t like tackling topics with which we are unfamiliar or that are rife with conflict and controversy. With the exception of those who tend to be brash and combative, most preachers avoid potential land mines. The Bible is filled with countercultural and difficult truths, teaching that rubs against every part of our flesh as fallen people. In my experience, God seems to care little for what we deem politically correct. If topics alone drive our preaching decisions, we may find ourselves avoiding those things we simply don’t want to deal with.

Third, you may fail to teach people how to read the Bible. The greatest weakness of topical preaching is that it doesn’t always instruct listeners how to read and interpret the Bible. For a long time I sat under topical preaching almost exclusively, and I would find myself walking away impressed by the preacher’s ability to find an array of relevant material in the Bible but insecure about my own ability to do so. It also didn’t teach me about context—that every verse has additional pertinent verses that come before and after. It didn’t force me to see that each verse is part of a larger book that is part of a Testament that is part of a

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metanarrative. If preachers aren't careful to teach the context of Scripture, listeners won't know who wrote each book and why. Ultimately, topical preaching doesn't effectively help people understand how the Bible is put together, how it should be read, and how it can be prayerfully studied.

If you are to faithfully shepherd a body of God's people, topical preaching will need to be a necessary weapon in your preaching arsenal. As a fellow pastor, however, I would encourage you not to make it the steady diet you feed God's people due to the liabilities mentioned above. Instead, use expository preaching as the main style and source of your weekly preaching ministry.

Differing definitions for what constitutes expository preaching abound. Bryan Chapell writes, "The technical definition of an expository sermon requires that it expound Scripture by deriving from a specific text main points and subpoints that disclose the thought of the author, cover the scope of the passage, and are applied to the lives of listeners."² More succinctly, Jason Meyer defines it as "stewarding and heralding God's word in such a way that people encounter God through his word."³ One of my personal favorites is from Mark Dever, who says, "Expositional preaching is preaching in which the main point of the biblical text being considered becomes the main point of the sermon being preached."⁴ In the simplest sense, expositional preaching takes one text and draws out the author's original intent. You start with a passage and build the sermon around it. It is the opposite of having something you want to say and then finding a text to support it. It is textually driven preaching.

Perhaps the greatest strength of expository preaching is

that is demonstrates to listeners how to read the Bible. Faithful exposition forces us to take into account the context of the passage. You have to know the author, the audience, the setting, and the purpose for which it was written. You have to understand how all the other material surrounding the text informs the way you read and understand it. These are skills all Christians should employ every time they read Scripture, not just when preachers preach. When I do this well as a preacher, my sermon not only faithfully relays God's Word to my people, but also demonstrates how listeners can read the Bible for themselves.

Expository preaching also forces you to discuss difficult topics. If topical preaching encourages you to preach your pet topics and to avoid difficult ones, expository preaching does the opposite. As preachers, we are often averse to preaching difficult, confusing, controversial, or awkward topics. If you choose to be an expository preacher, and especially if you preach verse by verse through entire books of the Bible, you won't have the luxury of skipping topics. If it's in the text, you'll have to deal with it.

My hope is that you choose to build the legacy of your preaching ministry on biblical exposition, with some topical preaching mixed in, to best serve your people. While you have some liberty in *how* you preach, you have none regarding *what* you preach. We are called to preach the Word. Regardless of whether you choose an expositional, topical, narrative, evangelistic, or any other style, make absolutely certain that your preaching is not sprinkled but rather saturated with and driven by the Word of God.

Christ Centered

The Bible is not a disconnected mix of moral fables that point you toward a happier life. The entire Bible, from beginning to end, is the true story of God reconciling the world to Himself through the person and work of Jesus Christ. That means the whole Bible is about Jesus.

In Luke 24, Jesus walks a couple of His disciples through the Bible study to end all Bible studies. Luke tells us, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures *the things concerning himself*” (v. 27, emphasis added). This means we can’t preach Christ only from the New Testament, because Jesus was specifically walking them through the Old. The Old Testament anticipates the coming of Christ. The New Testament announces His arrival, declares His message, and then anticipates His return. So if Christ isn’t in our sermons, we aren’t preaching faithful ones. As the great British preacher Charles Spurgeon once said, “Let your sermons be full of Christ, from beginning to end crammed full of the gospel.”⁵ That’s what we’re after: sermons crammed full of Christ.

Culturally Contextualized

To contextualize something is simply to bring it into the present context—meaning the present language, setting, and situation. Contextualization has received a steady stream of criticism in recent years. What I find curious about such criticism is that we all contextualize. When you travel abroad and stumble through a sad but sincere attempt to order your latte in the native tongue, you’re doing the work of contextualization. As a preacher, whether you wear jeans and a T-shirt or

a three-piece suit while preaching, you're contextualizing. If you're not preaching the New Testament in Greek each Sunday, you're contextualizing.

I do, however, understand the concern and believe caution is necessary. The fear is that if we *contextualize* the message, we will somehow *compromise* it. This criticism assumes we may be attempting to soften biblical imperatives. If we're pulling proverbial punches for fear of offending modern ears, we're not contextualizing—we're stripping the message of its truth and power. When done correctly, though, contextualization does not compromise. In contextualizing, we simply labor to make the original meaning of the ancient text clearer to modern ears. Even Jesus contextualized when He drew images from first-century agrarian settings to teach His parables. When Jesus spoke of farmers (Matt. 13:3–9), shepherds (John 10), and vineyards (Matt. 20:1–16), he was contextualizing. He was using everyday references to convey eternal truths. That is our task as well. At no point are we to distort or dumb down the text, but we are to lead our listeners back into its historical setting and meaning by using language, imagery, and ideas that people can understand.

Directed to the Whole Person

God's Spirit is in the business of using His Word to completely transform His people (see Rom. 12:2). This means the job of the preacher is to bring the whole message of God's Word to bear on the whole person. Our minds, hearts, and behaviors should be progressively changed as we sit under the authority of God's Word. Unfortunately, much preaching de-

faults to reaching only the mind or heart or behavior—rather than informing all three.

We preach to the head. Romans 12:2 says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your *mind*” (emphasis added). All change, transformation, and renewal starts in the mind, which means we better be preaching to the heads of those listening. A sermon is not a Hallmark movie. The goal is not just to make people cry, feel good, or walk away encouraged by mere sentiment. We can’t restrict our preaching to emotions; we also have to preach to the mind. That means we have to anticipate objections, dismantle doubt, and respond to skepticism with reason. We have to deal with the text as a matter of fact and skillfully explain, illustrate, and apply it to the thought patterns of God’s people.

We preach to the heart. While faithful preaching should first emphasize the renewal of the mind, it need not avoid passion and emotion. Many pastors, however, are leery of appealing to people’s feelings. Their caution is understandable and, in many cases, wise.

We live in a feelings-driven culture. Everyone is encouraged to “follow your heart.” That’s great advice if you’re a Disney princess, but it’s devastating if you’re an actual person living in the real world. Our feelings don’t always indicate what is real. We are not to be led by our hearts; instead, our minds should drive the way we feel, and good pastors know this. They don’t want to be guilty of manipulating people’s emotions to get a momentary response, so they steer clear of this area altogether. But God has given us the capacity to experience things deeply and to respond intensely, and to neglect

this aspect of the human experience is to neglect a critical part of those we're called to shepherd.

To preach to the heart means to preach to the center of who a person is—their motives, passions, and desires. Jesus was amazing at this. After His mind-blowing, life-changing conversation with two of the disciples on the Emmaus road just after His resurrection, they said, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:32). Jesus changed their minds as He helped them rethink the meaning of the Old Testament, showing them that it was ultimately about Him (Luke 24:27). And this shift in their thinking made them feel differently. Their hearts burned inside them with the realization that this news changed everything. This is what we're after every week! We want people's hearts to burn within them. Our goal is to leave listeners feeling entirely different about whatever subject we're addressing because we've preached first to their minds and then to their hearts.

We preach to the hands. Preaching to the mind and heart should leave people thinking a simple question: *So, what should I do?* It's a question of application and implication. Other questions include: *What action are we supposed to take in light of what we've just heard? Why does this matter?* These are the right kind of questions to ask every time we come to God's Word.

In John 13:17, Jesus said, “If you know these things, blessed are you if you *do* them” (emphasis added). Knowledge without action is worthless. Unfortunately, I hear a fair amount of preaching that does little to help people sort out the implications of the information conveyed in Scripture. We've already established that faithful preaching is not a self-help seminar,

but that it should be helpful. At the very least, we need to help people start thinking through the implications of every text in their daily lives. (We'll discuss this more in chapter 6.)

We need to have the humility and self-awareness to acknowledge that preaching to one of these three aspects of a person typically comes more naturally to us than preaching to all three. Your own wiring, theological presuppositions, and personal experiences tend to point you toward one direction more than the others. For instance, if you're academically minded, you may naturally preach more to the head. If you're more relationally minded, you may default to the heart. If you're more missionally minded or action oriented, you may emphasize the hands. The key is knowing yourself and intentionally preaching to the entire person—the head, heart, and hands.

Proclaimed Boldly

Faithful preaching is not just *what* you say, but also *how* you communicate it. As Paul concluded his letter to the Ephesians, he petitioned them to pray on his behalf. Notice his request:

To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth *boldly* to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it *boldly, as I ought to speak*. (6:18–20, emphasis added)

Of all that he could have asked prayer for, he mentioned boldness. According to Paul, faithful preaching should have

a specific tone. Our sermons should be marked not by apology, equivocation, or timidity. Biblical preaching is marked by boldness. That boldness is given by the Spirit of God and bound up in our conviction that the Word of God is actually true and thus crucial for people to understand and obey. Most of us don't like starting conflict, making others feel uncomfortable, or ruffling people's feathers. But we have to love people more than we love their comfort and their approval of us. A faithful sermon is one that declares the authority of the Bible and does so boldly.

If you're like me, you probably feel overwhelmed at this point. A faithful sermon is no small task. Crafting just one sermon that is Scripture-saturated, Christ-centered, culturally contextualized, directed to the whole person, and proclaimed boldly is beyond our own ability. We can fall short in so many ways that we may be tempted not even to start. Yet the mission is so urgent that we have to put our heads down, dig in, and do our best. My goal is to help you as you move forward. So pray that the Holy Spirit would empower you to do what you can't do on your own, and then turn the page so we can get to work.