

PREACHING

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? – *Romans 10:14 ESV*

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of a pastor? Probably, it's preaching. In every church I've served there were people who just called me "Preacher." In this day of videos and podcasts, there's still amazing power in face-to-face, in-person communication, especially when it's anointed by the Holy Spirit of God.

Why Preach?

Preaching the word of God is an awesome responsibility. When you stand in front of people and preach, they expect to hear not only God's Word, the Bible, but God's words to them personally. Some of the worst experiences of my ministry have come when I temporarily lost sight of that. If you start taking preaching lightly, or begin to see it as just a job or a routine, you may sound just as good to your own ears, but the power will be gone and your people will know it - and if you keep it up, they'll be gone, too.

The first, last and continuing rule of preaching is, **soak it in prayer**. Don't write something pretty or important-sounding and ask God to bless it. Don't

proclaim your own opinions and expect God to anoint it. **Find out what God wants these particular people at this particular time to hear and understand and do, and make that as clear and compelling as you can,** with God's help. Then leave the results to God.

Every sermon should do four things: **proclaim a truth, explain its meaning, apply it to life, and encourage action.** Every pastor naturally leans more toward one of these than the other three - for me, I love the explaining part, and I have to consciously remind myself to include the other three. Bible passages and topics differ in how easy they are to understand or how much people need to be encouraged to follow them. But you need to include some proclamation, explanation, application and motivation or your sermon won't be complete. And this doesn't really come under preaching, but if you are motivating your people to do something, provide a way - church program, volunteer opportunity, resources - for them to do it.

In other words, every sermon needs to answer four questions about your Bible text: What does it say? What does it mean? What does God want me to do about it? What is going to get me out of my chair to do it?

You notice I assume your sermon is based on a Bible text. You don't have to start by reading a passage, though that's an excellent way to begin. But **if what you say isn't what the Bible says, you may be lecturing, you may be arguing, or you may just be spouting off, but you aren't preaching.**

Using the Bible

Preaching starts with the Bible.

I often hear preachers say, "I just read the Bible and say what it says." If that's all there is to it, why do so many who "just say what the Bible says" wind up saying such different things?

The Bible is the inspired, inerrant word of God. But the way God chose to convey his inspired, inerrant word is through a collection of writings from dozens of authors, writing over fifteen hundred years or more, in a variety of cultures and literary styles, and three different languages – none of which most pastors can read.

The fact is, **it's not always obvious what God is saying.** And you know what? I believe God wants it that way. Jesus spoke in parables so that only those who cared enough to ask him would understand (Matthew 13:36; 15:15). The riches of the Bible are like gold: a few nuggets lie on the surface where anyone can find them, but only those who are willing to dig will strike the vein.

Successful gold miners know the rules that lead to finding rich ore in the ground. Successful preachers know the rules that lead to finding God's truth in the Bible. Here are a few of the most basic rules.

Read meaning out of the Bible, not into it

Don't start with your opinion and then look for passages to support it. **Start with the Bible and look for God's opinion.** If you really want to find what God says about something, these rules will help you find it. Of course, by picking and choosing verses, and ignoring the rules, you can make the Bible seem to say anything you want. But it's a dangerous thing to say, "Thus saith the Lord," or even "Thus saith the Bible," when what you really mean is, "Thus saith my own opinion" (see Jeremiah 14:15).

God doesn't contradict himself

If a passage seems to contradict another passage, or a fact from science, history or archeology, then you don't understand the passage, or what it seems to contradict, or both. Keep praying and studying. Look for a way of understanding it that allows all the seemingly contradictory parts to be true. In the meantime, don't focus on the problems. As the American humorist Mark Twain said, "It's not the parts of the Bible I can't understand that bother me. It's the parts I do understand." Focus on obeying the parts you understand. The more you do, the more you'll understand, and the part you don't understand will shrink.

Let the Bible interpret the Bible

If one part of the Bible isn't clear about a subject, see what else the Bible has to say about it. Put it all together and come to an understanding that accounts for all the Bible says.

Context, context, context

Realtors say there are three keys to the price of a house: location, location, and location. The three keys to a Bible passage are context, context, and context. Literary context is the words that precede and follow the passage you're looking at. Historical context describes the events surrounding the writing of the passage. Cultural context describes the values, customs and beliefs of the culture in which it was written. Any or all of these can shed important light on what the original author was trying to get the original readers to understand.

Meaning, principle, application

On the surface it seems like the task of Bible reading is to understand what the words mean and apply them to your life. Unfortunately, this skips an important step. Sometimes directly applying the words would work fine in the age and culture in which it was written, but it doesn't work at all in a different age or culture. This is why understanding the cultural context can be so important.

The missing step is to determine the principle underlying the words. Then you apply the principle in a way that makes sense for your time and culture.

For instance, at the ends of several of his letters Paul tells the Christians to greet one another with a holy kiss. In that culture a kiss was a commonly accepted greeting of affection and fellowship. In many cultures today the same meaning would be conveyed by a handshake, or possibly a hug. In these cultures, attempting to kiss another person could lead to a grave misunderstanding. Here, offering a handshake instead of a kiss is not

disobeying the Bible, it's obeying the principle Paul was really getting at.

Don't be dogmatic about anything the Bible isn't dogmatic about

Some things in the Bible are very clear, such as salvation by grace through faith. Other things are not so clear, such as when Jesus will come back. Where the Bible is clear, stand firm for the truth. Where the Bible is not clear, allow people their opinions.

Where the Bible isn't clear, consult Christian teaching, your spirit and your mind

If the Bible is clear you can stop there. But some passages aren't clear. Read how other Christians have understood them. Listen to God in your spirit. Learn all you can about the question, then consider what seems reasonable. And if you have this much trouble understanding a passage, be generous with those whose similar struggles lead them to interpret it differently.

Literal, figurative, allegorical

In America we have a phrase to describe when rain is coming down very hard. We say, "It's raining cats and dogs." We all understand what that means because we say it all the time. But imagine someone two thousand years in the future, speaking a different language, trying to understand that phrase. Should they take it literally - were we claiming that actual cats and dogs were falling from the sky? Is it allegorical - were we trying to convey some spiritual truth using rain, cats and dogs as symbols of something else? Or is it figurative - an idiom that everyone in our time, language and culture understood through common use?

All these types of writing were used by those who wrote the Bible, and more. Special literary types such as poetry, wisdom, and apocalyptic writing have their own rules of interpretation. For instance, sometimes prophecies

had an immediate fulfillment as well as a future meaning.

In most cases, if you read the Bible the same way you read any other book, your common sense will tell you if something is meant to be taken literally. When Jesus said, “*I am the vine*”(John 15:1), nobody thinks he was inviting people to pick grapes from him. But when the meaning is not so obvious, consider what kind of writing you are dealing with.

Use study tools, but remember they aren’t inspired

Christians have been studying the Bible for almost two thousand years, and Jews have been studying the Old Testament for almost as long again. Take advantage of their work. Cross-references, concordances and search functions on digital Bibles can help you let the Bible interpret the Bible. Bible encyclopedias and handbooks can tell you about historical and cultural context. Commentaries can teach you what other Christians have learned and thought about a given passage. A good study Bible will give the most important of this information on the same page as the Bible text. And of course the internet is a wealth of information. Use all of these tools in your study.

But remember, the Bible is inspired, but the study helps aren’t. As with anything else of human origin, some will be more useful than others. Follow Paul’s advice in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 *Test everything, hold fast what is good* (ESV).

Freely use what you find in your sermons, but if you use someone else’s words, be sure to give them credit. If you let people think someone else’s work is your own, you’ve crossed the line from research to stealing.

Approaches to Preaching

Now that you’ve studied the Bible, it’s time to proclaim it.

There is no one correct way to preach a sermon. Listen to great preachers, study their ways of constructing and delivering sermons, but don’t pick one to copy in every detail. If you could become just like someone

else, one of you would be redundant. And the world would be deprived of the uniqueness of you. As you keep learning and trying different approaches you'll gradually develop your own style that fits the gifts and abilities God built into you.

There are many different approaches to proclaiming God's word. Like many other things, your preaching style is a combination of choices in a number of different areas. You can picture each one as a line, with opposite extremes on the ends, and a whole range in between. As I describe them below, think about where on the line you usually fit. I'll tell you where I tend to land on each one, just as an example. Remember that one end is not better or worse than the other, although as in most things, extremes in preaching are probably best avoided. When we finish, picture it all together and you'll have the shape of your unique style of preaching. But stay flexible. In any given situation or sermon God may lead you to move one way or another in any of these aspects. And if you naturally favor one end, remind yourself not to neglect the other, because there will be people listening who hear better from that end.

Emotional or intellectual

Some preachers aim at informing the mind. Others aim at moving emotions. Pure information can be dry, while pure emotion can have little lasting effect. Personally, I'm much more comfortable with an intellectual or analytical approach. I have to consciously remind myself to consider emotion.

Prepared or spontaneous

Some preachers do a lot of study. They outline, write and rewrite their sermons. Others just stand up and start talking, trusting the Holy Spirit to supply the words.

I believe the Holy Spirit can inspire words being written just as surely as he can inspire words being spoken. Haven't you ever read a daily devotion and thought, "God sure knew I needed that today!" even though it was written

months or years ago?

On the other hand, spontaneous words can have an immediacy and freshness of delivery that is hard to duplicate when you're reading a manuscript. Of course, even the most ardent supporters of "speaking from the heart" prepare themselves through prayer and Bible study, even if they don't plan out specific words.

I've moved back and forth on this through the years, sometimes writing full manuscripts, sometimes outlines of varying detail, and sometimes just a few bullet points, but I always prepare in some way.

Some preachers plan their sermons weeks or months ahead of time, perhaps preaching series of sermons, perhaps following the church year or a calendar of Scripture passages called a lectionary. Others wait each week, sometimes until they stand up to preach, to see what God puts on their heart. A plan allows you to do advance preparation and advertise what you will be speaking about. Deciding each week allows you to preach on current events and needs without disrupting a sermon plan. I've tried all of these, and I still go back and forth on it.

Evangelism, discipleship or exhortation

Some preachers see their main job as leading people to become Christians. Their sermons focus on salvation. Others see their main job as helping Christians grow more and more into the image of Christ. Their sermons focus on understanding the faith and living it out. Others see their job as urging people to do what they already know they should do. Their sermons focus on encouragement and motivation.

Sometimes discipleship preachers neglect a compelling invitation to Jesus. Sometimes evangelistic preachers wind up with a church full of Christians who know they're born again, but not much else. Sometimes exhorters fail to build a solid foundation of truth to support their calls to action.

I praise the Lord for the evangelists and exhorters. My own gifts run more toward teaching and equipping, so I consciously remind myself to include in my sermons a simple gospel invitation and encouragement to practical

action. Which of these emphases do you need to remind yourself about?

Narrative or linear

Narrative preachers use stories to convey their messages, like the parables of Jesus. Linear preachers teach *precept upon precept, line upon line* (Isaiah 28:10 ESV), like the Sermon on the Mount. Stories engage interest and can be more memorable than outlines, but a systematic point by point explanation can be clearer than a story. I naturally think in outlines, but I try to use simple stories as illustrations because I know some of my listeners connect better that way.

Topical or expository

Topical preaching starts with a topic, and pulls together what the Bible says about it. Expository preaching starts with a Bible passage, and explains and applies it. I use both. I enjoy walking a congregation through a Bible passage, or even a whole book of the Bible in a series of sermons. But when a specific subject needs to be addressed, because it's in the news or something is making it relevant to my church, I preach a sermon or series about what the Bible says on that topic.

Eternal truths or current events

Some pastors focus solely on teaching Bible doctrine, trusting that mature Christians know how to take the eternal truths of the Bible and apply them to what is happening in their lives and their community. Other pastors emphasize life situations and current events, knowing that newer Christians need to be taught how to think Biblically about the events of their lives and the world. My own approach is to teach Bible truths, and use current events and everyday life to illustrate and apply them.

Engagement with the world or separation from it

Some pastors feel like the church should be a place where people can rise above the social and political opinions that so often divide people in other contexts. Others believe God calls the church to be a prophetic voice, speaking truth to power.

As you prayerfully consider whether God wants you to preach on a social or political topic, these questions might be helpful: Is there a moral issue here that is clearly addressed in the Bible, or is it strictly a political or philosophical disagreement about the best way to do good? If the government doing something that negatively affects Christians or a minority, is God calling you to address it, or does he want you to focus on getting people saved? How important is it to God that you not risk alienating those already in your congregation, or not risk getting the church closed down? Does God want you to be a public face for this issue, a behind-the-scenes worker, or a silent prayer warrior, or does he want you to leave this issue for another part of the body of Christ to deal with?

I have good Christian friends and colleagues, and even members of my own family, who see some political questions very differently from the way I do. I know they love God, I know they understand the Bible, I know they know how to receive God's guidance in their lives, yet sometimes our politics are completely opposite. What am I to make of that? I have to conclude that God doesn't necessarily want every Christian to see every issue the same way. If I believe God wants me to vote "Yes," and you believe God wants you to vote "No," I have to believe we may both be right. God may have his reasons for letting an election be decided 55/45 instead of being unanimous.

Personally, I try not to let my congregation know my personal political views. When I feel led to address a moral issue, I preach the relevant Bible truths and let people make the political connection. Other than that, I leave politics alone. But I have many preacher friends who make their politics very clear, and I trust that's how God is leading them.

The whole Bible or your favorite passages

Some preachers make a real effort to preach all the doctrines of Christianity from all parts of the Bible. Others feel that God has called them to emphasize a specific message, perhaps an important truth they feel is not well understood.

In my own ministry I've found that many people in the churches I've served have not been taught much about the Holy Spirit. In attempting to correct that I probably preach more about the Holy Spirit than many other pastors. In general, though, a local congregation needs a well-rounded diet of spiritual truth. One of the values of the lectionary is that, if you commit to preach from the prescribed Bible passage each week, it will force you to cover parts of the Bible you might otherwise neglect.

It may be that there are some areas of the Bible you just don't feel qualified to preach about, at least not yet. One way to address this is to invite guest preachers who can talk about those things. It will round out what your congregation hears, and you will learn something yourself.

If you feel strongly that God has given you a specific message to share, you may be called to be a traveling teacher, visiting various churches and preaching the same thing everywhere, rather than pastoring a congregation that needs to hear something different every week.

Holiness or grace

Holiness preachers emphasize the need to live obedient lives pleasing to God in every way. Grace preachers emphasize God's unconditional love and forgiveness. Obviously both are true, but both can also easily be misunderstood. Preaching holiness without preaching grace can allow people to think they earn forgiveness and salvation by their good works. Preaching grace without preaching holiness can allow people to think they can get away with anything without eternal consequences. I try to be right in the middle on this one.

The chosen few or every tribe and tongue

Some preachers focus on the differences between Christians and non-Christians, or even between their church and other churches. This can build a sense of identity and community, but it can also allow people to be judgmental about other groups, or feel they are better than everybody else. Other preachers emphasize God's love for everyone. This can build openness and tolerance, but it can also allow people to feel that all religions are equally valid. I probably tend a little toward the second side, so every now and then I make it a point to emphasize that Jesus Christ is the only way to God.

Speaking for God or teaching people to hear God

Some preachers believe God has called them to tell people what God wants them to do. Others feel God wants them to teach people how to hear God for themselves. The first can be good with a congregation that is fairly new in their faith, or when God actually has spoken strongly to the pastor, but it can really open the people up for manipulation from unscrupulous preachers. Personally, I tend pretty strongly in the second direction on this one, but beware: people can think God is telling them some pretty strange things.

Some Don'ts

Don't preach "at" specific people

It can be tempting to use a sermon to send a message to one person, or a small group of troublemakers. Resist that temptation. The rest of the congregation will either know who you're aiming at and take sides, or they'll think you're aiming at them and resent it. And they'll be cheated of hearing what they need to hear. Besides, it usually doesn't work anyway.

One pastor had a member who always thought the sermons applied to other people. One Sunday there was a snowstorm and this member was the only person who showed up. The pastor thought, "Aha, now I've got him!"

and preached a sermon aimed right at the person. When he was done the member said, “Great sermon, Pastor. Too bad the people who needed to hear it weren’t here!”

Jesus said if you have something to say to a person, say it to them one-on-one (Matthew 18:15-17).

Don’t use the pulpit to advance a personal agenda

The pulpit is a sacred place devoted to proclaiming God’s word. There’s nothing wrong with pursuing your own ideas and projects, and there are many legitimate means for doing that. The sermon is not one of them. The only agenda that should be advanced through preaching is God’s agenda.

Don’t use anyone in a sermon illustration without asking them first

This includes your family. Different people are sensitive about different things at different times. Even if you are holding someone up as a shining example of right, still ask them first. And never, ever use something told you in confidence, even if you think you have sufficiently disguised the person or situation. There is no quicker way to destroy trust.

Don’t try to cram too much into one sermon

This is one of which I’m often guilty. I know what I want to say because I’ve been studying it and thinking about it all week, if not for years. I tend to forget that my listeners haven’t been doing the same. Some of them may be completely unfamiliar with what I’m talking about. They need me to break it down for them. Some of the best preachers spend an entire sermon explaining and illustrating one point in a number of different ways. If you find that you are rushing to say everything you want to, maybe it would be better to break your message into several sermons.

Don't talk beyond people's ability to listen

Some congregations start fidgeting if the sermon goes beyond fifteen minutes. Others feel cheated if it's less than forty-five. I was disappointed to discover that very little of that difference is due to the skill and ability of the preacher. Much of it is cultural expectation. At least as much has to do with the environment - it's hard to keep people's interest if they are physically uncomfortable.

And people won't keep listening if you run out of things to say. One Sunday a parishioner told me, "Your sermon had a great ending. Unfortunately, you kept talking another ten minutes."

If you find your sermons are running a little long, go back and see if you are "running off on rabbit trails." Side issues can confuse your listeners and distract them from your main point. Every sermon should have one clear goal. Anything that doesn't contribute to that goal should not be in that sermon. Take the side issue and make it the main point of another sermon.

Somebody said, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." Most people will only remember one thing from your sermon. Make sure it's the main thing.

Points to Remember

- Soak your preaching in prayer.
- Every sermon should proclaim a truth, explain its meaning, apply it to life, and encourage action.
- Learn and use the time-tested rules for interpreting the Bible.
- Study great preachers and sermons, then develop your own style.
- Don't misuse the privilege of preaching.