

PREACHING
THE WHOLE
COUNSEL
of GOD

DESIGN AND DELIVER
GOSPEL-CENTERED SERMONS

JULIUS J. KIM

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PART ONE

DISCOVERING
THE TRUTH *of*
THE TEXT
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CHAPTER 1

PRAYING, SELECTING, READING, AND MEDITATING

We begin this book by examining several preliminary steps that are important to the overall sermon preparation and delivery process. The four steps of *praying*, *selecting*, *reading*, and *meditating* provide an indispensable foundation for the herald of the King as he discovers, discerns, designs, and delivers gospel-centered sermons. We shall look at these four preliminary yet foundational steps in turn.

Praying

The Bible records that the first Christian leaders of the fledgling NT church devoted themselves to two primary tasks: preaching and prayer (Acts 6:4). Following the example set by their rabbi, Jesus, they knew that prayer was an essential part of their ministry. They remembered how Jesus would often wake early in the morning, while it was still dark, to pray to his heavenly Father before his preaching and teaching (Mark 1:35–39). Early Christian believers included prayer as an essential part of their life together (Acts 2:42).

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The apostle Paul also understood the necessity of prayer for his ministry. His letters reveal the priority he placed on prayer not only for the growth and maturity of the believers (Eph 1:15–23) but also for his own ministry of preaching (Col 3:2–4). He knew that without the power of God, his preaching ministry would be fruitless. He prayed and asked others to pray with him and for him. He prayed that the gospel would transform believers (Eph 3:14–21; Col 1:9–10) and prayed that his preaching would be bold and effective (Eph 6:19–20; Col 4:3–4). After all, prior to sending his disciples out on their preaching ministry, Jesus said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). As preachers of the Word, we follow in the pattern of Jesus and the apostles: praying is a necessary part of our sermon preparation and delivery.¹

We pray before, during, and after the process of preparing a sermon. We will not grasp the truth, goodness, and beauty of God’s Word apart from the Holy Spirit’s work of conviction, illumination, and regeneration (John 16:8–10, 13–16; Titus 3:5). This is what we pray for ourselves as we prepare and for our church as they hear. We pray for comprehension and integration, application and transformation.

Every effort in sermon preparation is worthless without the accompanying work of the Holy Spirit’s work. Prayer is not simply one important step in the sermon preparation process. It is the most important step in the process of sermon design and delivery. We pray throughout our sermon preparation efforts—before we read, as we interpret, when we write, and while we preach. Pray for wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, both for yourself and for your hearers. Pray for protection, provision, and power. Pray that unbelievers and believers would trust and obey the gospel of Jesus Christ to the glory of God.

1. What is prayer? The Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC) provides a helpful summary: “Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, (1) for things agreeable to his will, (2) in the name of Christ, (3) with confession of our sins, (4) and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies” (Q&A 98). The proof texts are Ps 62:8; 1 John 5:14; John 16:23; Ps 32:5–6; Dan 9:4; Phil 4:6.

Selecting

Part of the process of preparing to preach is selecting your text and/or topic. While this may seem self-evident, there are some important factors to consider when selecting a text to preach, not the least of which is discerning the spiritual state and needs of your unique congregation.

As heralds, we don't speak truth in the abstract. We speak truth to a particular audience at a particular time in a particular place. Knowing your audience is an important component in selecting your text and speaking to your audience. It is both a science and an art. A preacher can learn more about his audience by doing a demographic analysis of such traits such as age, gender, educational level, and so on. Moreover, some of the cultural values and sensibilities of the group can also be discerned through analysis. The art of audience analysis gives consideration to how those demographics and values shape the thinking and feelings of one's audience in response to the truths and implications of the gospel. Richard Lints has been helpful in showing the theological link between the art and science of preaching. He states that our task is essentially a theological one, as we move out from our understanding of God and his Word and preach it to particular people in their time, space, and history.²

The apostle Paul understood this intersection between the timeless truths of God and the time-bound nature of his different audiences. Take, for example, his preaching ministry at a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Act 13) and his presentation evangelism in Athens (Acts 17). While the nonnegotiable elements of his gospel proclamation remained the same, his selection of material and his presentation were drastically different due to the audience. To the primarily Jewish audience in Acts 13, he strategically employed several OT texts and argued that Jesus was the promised Messiah who had come to die for sin yet was raised for their justification. In Acts 17, however, his approach was remarkably

2. Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 9.

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different. To this group of biblically illiterate philosophers on Mars' Hill, he constructed a biblical worldview starting with creation and then proclaimed Christ's resurrection from the dead. While much more can be said about these texts, it's clear that Paul engaged in careful audience analysis to discern his listeners' spiritual and cultural state so as to present the gospel of Jesus more effectively.³ Knowing your audience influences the text you select.

For many preachers, however, selecting a text occurs on the Monday or Tuesday prior to the upcoming Sunday. Unfortunately, this is not helpful or wise. Because of the limited amount of time available, you will not have the time you'd like and need for important factors such as studying the text and context, meditating on its truths for you and your hearers, finding compelling illustrations, and identifying meaningful applications. Furthermore, the last thing you need is to be stressed because you may not be sure if the text or topic you've chosen is the right one at the right time. To offset this tendency and temptation, you need to explore the concept weeks or even months ahead. I offer three words of advice when it comes to selecting a text to preach: pray, pattern, and pastor.

Pray

Spend time seeking the Lord through prayer for wisdom on the decision of which text to preach. Wise pastors know that discerning the needs of their congregation to determine what to preach requires help from the Lord God of all wisdom. We cannot discern the hearts of our hearers without the aid of the Holy Spirit, who searches hearts. Go to the Lord in prayer and ask for wisdom and insight into the portions of Scriptures your congregation needs to hear. Some pastors may want to spend some intentional time alone, praying and reflecting, while others may want to pray with fellow leaders in the church. Some pastors may want to spend a few days in prayer and planning as they map out their sermon series

3. For more on Paul's approaches in Acts 13 and 17, see D. A. Carson, "Athens Revisited," *Telling the Truth: Evangelizing Postmoderns*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 384–98.

for the entire year. Others may want to use a day each quarter to pray and discern. Whatever method you choose, be intentional in setting aside time to pray as part of selecting which texts or topics to preach.

Pattern

There are three patterns that may help you determine what portions of Scripture to preach: the *lectio continua*, the topical/textual, and the lectionary.

1. *Lectio Continua*: Literally meaning “reading continuously,” this pattern of text selection essentially follows the biblical text as it has been given. For most preachers this means preaching through an entire biblical book or smaller sections of a longer book. Many preachers in the history of the church have followed this pattern so that their congregations would be able to hear and be fed from the whole counsel of God. There are many benefits to this method, not the least of which is that the upcoming Sunday’s preaching text has been preselected for you, as it were, minimizing your stress of selecting the “perfect” text. While you still need to wisely determine the length of the portion of Scripture based on issues such as genre, this method also provides a helpful model for your congregation as they read, interpret, and apply Scripture for themselves.⁴ Further, issues and topics emerge naturally from the text rather than making it seem that you have specific theological “axes to grind” or “hobbyhorses to ride.”

This pattern allows you to present all that the Bible has for your congregation as you faithfully preach week by week and year by year. The challenge, of course, is the possibility that certain series may become too long and unwieldy. Pastors need to wisely determine when and if a break from a series is needed to address an urgent need in the congregation. Also, make sure you provide enough context for those who are new and did not have the benefit of sitting through the series thus far.

2. Topical/Textual: Another pattern to use in the selection of what to preach is the topical/textual approach. In this pattern, the preacher focuses

4. Chapters 4 and 5 will cover issues related to genre.

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on an idea or topic and preaches that topic from a text or several texts of Scripture that address it. With this pattern, the wise preacher has the ability to focus on certain topics and issues the congregation may be facing in their own lives or in society at large. It is crucial, however, that the preacher does his best to ensure that he is being faithful to the text(s) and allowing the primary truths to be communicated and not twisting texts and their meaning to somehow “fit” the chosen topic. Thus, if after studying the text the preacher discovers that the selected text does not address the desired topic, he will need to find another text that is germane to the topic.

This method has many advantages. First, it allows the preacher flexibility in choosing topics from scriptural texts that will ultimately meet the unique needs of his congregation. Second, it provides a built-in unity to the sermon, as the main topic will hopefully be the emphasis and focus of the entire sermon. Third, it helps the congregation see how the Bible as a whole addresses topics of importance for its spiritual life.

Preachers need to take care, however, that they don't allow certain topics to dominate their preaching emphases and series. One can easily fall into the temptation of constantly preaching specific topics that are of interest only to him. Furthermore, strictly using the topical approach may not allow the congregation to mature through a balanced diet of the whole counsel of God. A balanced approach of using multiple patterns of selection can offset this.

3. **Lectionary:** This approach to selecting texts or topics to preach emerged from the Jewish synagogue worship context. It refers to a book or listing that contains preassigned Scripture readings for worship. For every worship service, Jewish rabbis and preachers referred to the listing of verses for that particular worship day. In the Jewish synagogue context, usually two texts were chosen for each Sabbath day worship: a passage from the Law (the five books of Moses) and the Prophets (the major and minor prophets). An example of this is found in Jesus' “Bread of Life” sermon in John 6. He utilized the given lectionary passages that were assigned for that day as the primary texts for his sermon.

Today, when pastors decide to do a series of Christmas sermons during December, they are following this lectionary pattern during the

season of Advent. Using this approach has certain benefits. It focuses the preaching texts and topics for the year on the redemptive work of Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection. It also means the preacher doesn't have to decide which texts or topics to preach, as it has already been decided for him. And the topics that are addressed emerge naturally from the texts that were preassigned so as to remove the potential charge that the preacher chooses to speak on his "hobbyhorse" topics.

Pastor

In addition to praying and considering different patterns of selecting texts and topics, you will also want to think *pastorally* regarding your unique congregation and the parts of Scripture that the Lord is calling you to bring to them. Like parents who carefully discern the best foods to give their children for their physical growth and development, pastors need to wisely determine congregational needs for spiritual nurture and maturation. Pastors thus need to analyze factors such as their congregants' various levels of biblical education and prior knowledge, general needs, and specific problems to come up with a schedule of preaching texts and topics that are beneficial for them. Since every congregation has unique characteristics and needs, this pastoral task is both an art and a science. Every pastor is called to "know, feed, lead, and protect" the flock entrusted to his care.⁵ To help with the process, here are some questions that may be beneficial.

- What parts of the Bible have been preached before? What parts have not?
- Has there been a balance of preaching from the OT and the NT?
- Has there been a diversity of genres (narrative, poetry, etc.)?
- Are there any specific topics that may be helpful for the congregation right now (e.g., suffering, stewardship)?
- Are there sinful patterns emerging from your counseling ministry that may require a special series?

5. See Timothy Z. Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader: Achieving Effective Shepherding in Your Church* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2010).

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- Is there a balance of topics regarding exaltation of God (worship), edification of believers (discipleship), and evangelism to unbelievers (witness)?
- Is there a balance of doctrinal topics covering the major loci of theology?
- What texts or topics do your fellow leaders recommend?

Reading

After having selected the text and/or topic and prayed over it in light of your congregation, you are ready to *read* the text. What follows are some suggestions for reading the text in preparation for interpretation and communication.

First, read the text. Do this several times and you will pick up on prominent features and characteristics that might otherwise go unnoticed. Then, read the text in its context. Read at least one chapter before and one chapter after. After these initial readings, try to formulate the main idea of the text and its purpose. Answer these two questions: What is the text primarily about? What kind of response is it calling for? While this step of formulating a sermon proposition will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter (and in chapter 6), attempt a two-part preliminary statement after this initial stage of reading the text in its context.

There's a simple formula that is immensely helpful in capturing the main point and purpose of a text for preaching. Bryan Chapell suggests writing a two-part statement that begins with an indicative statement about God and finishes with an imperative statement about our response.⁶ You can start the first half of the statement with the word "Because" and the second half of the statement with "then." So it will look something like this: "Because God (fill in the rest according to what your text says), then we should (fill in the rest with the appropriate response)." You will undoubtedly modify this sermon proposition as

6. Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 143–49.

you progress in your sermon preparation, but it's helpful to start shaping the central idea and specific purpose of the text at this stage.

Meditating

In addition to the work of praying over, selecting, and reading the text humbly, *meditating* on the text and topics that you are preparing to preach is vital. From his study of the meaning of meditation in the Bible, Ed Clowney has argued that meditation is a spiritual discipline whereby one centers the mind in reflection on God through his Spirit-given Word, for the purposes of worship and wisdom.⁷ Since God is the source of all wisdom, and since God has revealed his wisdom in both his written Word and living Word (the Bible and Jesus), meditation on his Word through the Holy Spirit is one way to attain wisdom, which leads to worship.⁸ Thus, meditation is not just a mantra; it is reflection on God's wisdom for God's glory and our good. For preachers, this spiritual discipline is a key part of the overall process of wise sermon preparation. When we meditate, God's Word intersects with our hearts, and wisdom results in worship.

Meditation is fundamentally part of our praise of God. The meditation practices of Eastern religions (e.g., Zen Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation) lead one inward, into themselves. Christian meditation leads one outward to God as he is revealed in his Word. In describing the blessed man, the psalmist in Psalm 1:2 states that "his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night." Thus, when a Christian, or more specifically, a preacher, meditates, he does so by "going out," to the objective God revealed in this Word as part of his praise and worship. This outward activity is what distinguishes Christian meditation from the inward focus of religious mysticism.

Augustine, a great father of the early church, wrote his *Confessions* primarily as an exercise of meditation and not as a theological treatise.

7. Edmund P. Clowney, *CM: Christian Meditation* (Nutley, N.J.: Craig, 1979), 19–22.

8. *Ibid.*

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He writes about his own relationship to God devotionally and doxologically. Psalm 119:15–16 says, “I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.”

The wisdom of God found in his own revelation ultimately centers on wisdom personified, Jesus Christ. Clowney states,

Christian meditation is not and cannot be unmediated access to God, far less an experience of identity with God. Not ecstasy but wisdom marks the path of Christian meditation. To seek the face of the living God the Christian does not launch a voyage in inner space nor does he center on abstract infinity. Rather, he meditates on the Christ of Scripture and on the Scripture of Christ.⁹

Thus, when we meditate on God’s Word during our sermon preparation, “learning of Jesus is personal communion, not just textual instruction. A lover cherishes every word in a letter from his beloved; he does not just examine it as a document or file it for information. The Spirit of Jesus who inspired the Scripture is the Spirit who dwells in our hearts to bring living communion with the Lord.”¹⁰ The apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians makes it clear that Jesus is the focal point of our meditation, the center that holds all that God has revealed in the Word.

Christian meditation starts and ends with Jesus. Indeed, he is the Word made flesh, who became like us in his incarnation, yet was without sin so that through his sacrificial death on the cross and vindicating resurrection, we might be able to make sense of our sin-cursed lives and world. The preacher’s thoughts regarding the sermon text must find its way to Jesus. Through him, the preacher and the people have life and hope, comfort and courage. Knowing Jesus helps us to make him known with more clarity and compassion.

Here are some tips to help you meditate during your sermon preparation.

9. *Ibid.*, 29.

10. *Ibid.*, 30.

PRAYING, SELECTING, READING, AND MEDITATING

- Read the Scripture text in its context quietly several times. Try reading the text out loud.
- Try memorizing several key phrases and verses by reciting them aloud and writing them down.
- Praise God in light of what the text says about God and you.
- Reflect especially on what this passage says about God's works of creation and redemption.
- Pray to God, asking what you can learn from this text about God, you, and your congregation.
- Reflect especially on how God would want you to respond in light of the truths of this text.
- Praise God for his presence, provision, and power as you meditate on his Word.
- Share the preaching text's message with others during the day and week as you have opportunity. Use it as part of your personal devotions and your family's devotions during the week.
- Meditate during the entire process of the sermon—especially when you are thinking about how to apply the truths of the passage to your heart and to the hearts of your listeners.

CHAPTER 2

INTERPRETING THE TEXT: LINGUISTIC, LITERARY, LIFE-SETTING ANALYSIS

Once you've prayerfully selected a text, you have to discover the truth it contains. Part of discovering the truth of the text according to the human author is to engage in the interpretation of the text itself. Before we examine the steps to analyze the text that you will be preaching, several preliminary comments are necessary.

First, you must approach this task as one who believes that the Word of God is trustworthy because it is inspired by God.¹ The Bible is a divine book. Though written over many years, by various authors, in multiple languages and cultures, the Bible is the most unique literature in all of world history because it was supernaturally authored by the living God so that mankind would know God and reach out to him.²

1. The best summary of my understanding of and commitment to the Scriptures is found in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), written by a group of pastors and scholars that met in Westminster Abbey in 1643–48. Under the orders of the English parliament, they were called to produce a document summarizing the main doctrines of Scripture. Many of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches worldwide use the WCF as their standards of doctrine, subordinate to the Scriptures. It can be accessed online at http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/.

2. 2 Tim 3:16–17; Acts 17:27.

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Some important implications that emerge from the conviction that God's words are trustworthy and inspired are that they are authoritative and relevant—ultimately calling us to trust and obey. For preachers, this has tremendous value. If the words of the King of Kings are divinely authoritative and eternally relevant, heralds can speak with self-forgetful boldness and confidence.

Second, though the Word of God is characterized by perspicuity (that the ideas of salvation in Jesus found in Scripture can be understood through normal means), careful interpretation is still necessary.³ This is because no one reads anything without engaging in interpretation. Whether we know it or not, when we read the Bible to discern its meaning we also bring along our unique history, experiences, knowledge, culture, and values. Furthermore, the Scriptures are human words written in history. This means that every word is influenced by language and culture. So while the Bible is a divine book, inspired by God, it is also a human one, with historical particularity and literary artistry.⁴ Thus, we must attempt to understand the text as it was written and received, not only in its unique historical context but also in its unique literary genre, be it prose, poetry, prophecy, or parables. In addition to all this, it's important to remember two other principles of interpretation: (a) the interpreter is only able to interpret the Word of God through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:13–16), and (b) the Scriptures interpret Scripture.

Third, this chapter is an overview of the exegetical process, that is, the analysis of the Scripture to discover the original meaning intended by the author to his audience.⁵ Like a detective gathering evidence at the scene, observing suspects and their actions, conducting interviews of witnesses, and examining the circumstances of the crime, the interpreter of the Scripture engages in a process of discovering all the elements

3. WCF 1:7.

4. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 19.

5. As an overview, this chapter cannot cover all the intricacies involved in this process. Hopefully readers will supplement their understanding of and skill in exegesis through supplemental reading and/or taking courses at a seminary or Bible college. For another helpful approach, see Dennis E. Johnson, "From Text to Sermon: A Step-by-Step Guide to Biblical Interpretation in Sermon Preparation," in *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2007), 397–407.

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related to the text: the author and recipients, occasion and purpose, language and culture, literary form and theological truths, and how it has been interpreted throughout the history of the church. This is done ultimately to help our hearers discover the meaning and significance of the text for their own lives, as they find connection to the original truths of the text through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, this first layer of interpretation, of discovering the truths of the text, is followed by the second layer of discerning Christ and the gospel in the text and context (see chapter 3). To these two layers of interpretation are added the third layer, finding meaning and significance to the contemporary hearer. Examples of these three layers will be seen in chapters 4 and 5.

Fundamentally, the key to discovering the truth of the text by the original author for the original audience is “to learn to read the text carefully and to ask the right questions of the text.”⁶ With that in mind, there are three stages of interpretative analysis that will help you carefully read and interpret the text. Please note that there is not only overlap between the different stages of interpretation but also a dynamic moving back and forth between the stages. In what follows, the process is dynamic and nuanced, involving both inductive and deductive methods of interpretation.

Discovering the truth of Scripture involves three types of analysis: linguistic analysis, literary analysis, and life-setting analysis. Or put in question format, What does the text actually say? How does it say it? When and why is it being said?

Linguistic Analysis: What Does the Text Actually Say?

In determining what the text says, six steps of linguistic analysis are suggested.

6. Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 23. Fee and Stuart helpfully recommend reading Mortimer Adler’s *How to Read a Book* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972). Another helpful book is T. David Gordon’s *Why Johnny Can’t Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2009).

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1. *Pray* for understanding and transformation. Prayer is vital not only for your own present comprehension but also for your future communication. The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit helps us understand God's Word. Pray for the Spirit's illumination throughout the entire process. In addition to comprehension, we also pray for transformation. That is, we pray that the message of the passage would change us first—in our head, heart, and hands.

2. *Read* the passage several times. Read the preaching passage in its context several times in the language with which you are most comfortable. As you are reading, keep these preliminary questions in mind: What is the main idea that the author is emphasizing? Why does he seem to be emphasizing these ideas (or what are the issues and problems, either explicit or implicit)? How does this all connect with the gospel of Jesus Christ and with my hearers? Even at this point, it is helpful to meditate on the answers to these questions. Jot down some preliminary ideas. The main idea of the passage can often be found through a specific statement in the passage, the context of the passage, repeated ideas, or a combination of these.

3. *Formulate* a preliminary sermon proposition.⁷ Though this statement will inevitably change, attempt a sermon proposition statement that has two parts: the first half identifies the main *what* of the text, namely, an indicative statement about God, his person, and work, that the author is communicating; and the second half identifies the *so what* of the text, namely, an imperatival statement describing the desired response to this truth. Try devising this sermon proposition in a consequential format: Start the first half of the proposition with the word "Because," followed by what this text may be stating regarding God.⁸ Finish the second half with the word "then" followed by the response we ought to have. Here is an example from 1 John 3:11–24: "*Because* God loved us first, *then* we ought to love one another."

4. *Translate* your preaching passage.⁹ Translate your passage from

7. See chapter 6 for more on the sermon proposition.

8. See Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). See also chapter 7.

9. I'm assuming here that the reader will have familiarity and a level of facility with the original languages of the Bible, Hebrew and Greek. For helpful books on interpretation

the Hebrew or Greek, parsing all the words and paying careful attention to anything that stands out (unique words, purpose statements, theological ideas, connections to other passages you know). Inspect the verbs and their tenses. Consider the nouns and their semantic range, that is, the ways in which the words were used by the author and audience in their day. At this point, it may be helpful to consult reference tools, such as dictionaries,¹⁰ grammars, concordances, and so on, jotting down notes on words or phrases that will help you formulate the meaning and significance of this passage.¹¹

5. *Identify* the syntax and structure of your passage. Take note of the genre of your passage (narrative, poetry, wisdom, epistle, etc.) as this determines the way an author organizes his ideas. While genre analysis will be examined in the next section, it's important at this stage to analyze the main movements of ideas in the preaching passage. For example, does the arrangement of the words and phrases within the sentences reveal anything?¹² What about the main movements of thought in the passage? Is anything significant in the relationship between the main movements and subordinate ideas? Do they reveal anything about the author's main ideas and intentions? Again, jot down the ideas you are discovering.

6. *Reformulate* your sermon proposition statement. Based on what you've newly discovered from your linguistic analysis thus far, clarify your

without knowledge of the biblical languages, see the following: Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*; Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1994); Daniel M. Doriani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1996); and Dennis E. Johnson, *Walking with Jesus through His Word: Christ-Centered Bible Study* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2015).

10. Useful Hebrew dictionaries include the BDB; William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972). For Greek, consult the BDAG; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989).
11. Note well that *using* these language tools (including computer ones) can be very different from *knowing* the language itself. Not knowing how a foreign language works can lead to erroneous interpretations and false teaching. Even a beginner's level study of the languages can be very advantageous (e.g., the equivalent of one year of study of both Hebrew and Greek). For self-study, I would recommend Gary Pratico and Miles Van Pelt's *Basics of Biblical Hebrew: E-Learning Bundle* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014) and William Mounce's *Learn Biblical Greek Pack* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).
12. See Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meanings: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

sermon proposition by including more key ideas from the text. Remember that your goal is to articulate the author's intended message regarding God and the subsequent response. You will simplify and condense your proposition later, so at this point utilize the main themes and words that this text uniquely states to hone the author's intended message.

Literary Analysis: How Does the Text Say It?

As you engage in the literary analysis of the text, examine your preaching text in light of the following three contexts: the chapter and book, other books of the Bible, and its genre.

1. Examine the passage in light of *the chapter and book*. Like concentric circles that form when a pebble is dropped in still water, you want to move out from your preaching passage and examine its surrounding literary contexts. First, examine the narrow literary context, that is, the passages before and after your preaching passage, looking for corresponding themes. Often, the preceding and following literary contexts offer insights into how to read and interpret the author's intention. For example, many of the narrative stories in the Gospels seem to be grouped together by the author around a central theme. Take, for instance, Mark 4:35–5:43, where a collection of four miracle stories reveals Jesus' increasing power and authority over natural and supernatural obstacles. Preaching one of these sections requires keeping in mind the surrounding contextual themes.

Moving further out, examine your passage in light of the entire book, looking for key themes related to your text's occasion and purpose. Are there similar problems being addressed and similar solutions being offered? Examine also how the entire book is structured. Does the book's larger structure have any significance to its purpose and meaning? If so, what is it and how does your preaching passage fit in that overall purpose? For example, the book of Mark can be divided into two parts between the prologue/introduction (1:1–15) and the conclusion (16:1–20). The two halves of the book answer two questions: Who is Jesus (1:16–8:26)? What did Jesus come to do (8:30–15:47)? Peter's confession that Jesus

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is the Christ forms the hinge between the two parts (8:27–30). Thus, preaching a passage found in the first half of the book will be influenced by Mark’s desire to answer the larger question of Jesus’ identity, whereas passages located in the latter half deal with Jesus’ mission.

Lastly, does the author have any other writings in the Bible? If so, are there any similar words, themes, and ideas? What makes the themes in this book similar or different from that book? For example, the apostle John utilizes the themes of light and darkness in both his gospel and his epistles. How does his usage of these themes in the gospel influence how he uses it in his letters? These clues will aid your overall interpretation and preaching of the text.

2. Examine the passage in light of *other books in the Bible*. After having examined the way the author composed his ideas in his unique literary style, you want to examine how the rest of Scripture communicates similar ideas and themes. Mentioned earlier, this principle of interpretation involves utilizing all of Scripture to help discover the meaning and significance of your passage. If God the Holy Spirit inspired the entire Bible, then there is a unified mind and meaning to all that was revealed. Though this is not an easy task, this step is crucial in ensuring that your interpretation coheres with the rest of biblical teaching.¹³ What does the Bible principally teach? That the triune God is creator, redeemer, and consummator, desiring to save a people for himself, through the person and work of Jesus Christ. All the books of the Bible must be seen under this story of redemption wrought within history.

3. Examine the passage in light of *its genre*. In addition to examining all the contexts of your passage, both narrow and broad, it is also important to examine the unique literary genre of your text. Genre is “a group of texts that bear one or more traits in common with one another.”¹⁴ Thus, works in a particular genre have similar literary characteristics—such as

13. Here theological dictionaries can be helpful: *TDNT*; Colin Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); Xavier Léon-Dufour, ed., *Dictionary of the New Testament*; trans. P. Joseph Cahill (New York: Seabury, 1973); Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

14. Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 76.

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style, form, techniques, and tone—in the way it communicates. Poetry, for example, is a genre that is characterized by parallelism and figurative language. As such, when one writes or reads poetry, certain rules govern the way it is conceived and received. All poetry will exhibit a similar kind and degree of artistry in getting the message across.

Genre analysis becomes important to the interpreter since it helps to first *classify* the type of literature it is (historical narrative, prophecy, epistle, etc.), which then helps *clarify* its meaning based on the conventions of that genre. Genre thus provides the interpreter with strategies to read and interpret the text. Consciously or not, readers make genre classifications that help them comprehend what they are reading. For example, when a father reads Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham* to his child, he will approach that text differently from when he later reads the stories found on the front page of his local newspaper. Thus, genre establishes *rules* for writing and for reading; it works as an unspoken contract between the writer and reader. Otherwise, communication would be impossible.

The genre of the text may also contribute to the way you outline your sermon. Though this will be discussed in chapter 6, whether your preaching passage is narrative, poetry, or law, for example, will influence how you may want to structure your sermon. There are two general ways to outline your sermon, either *textually* or *topically*. Textual sermon outlines essentially follow the flow of the biblical passage. As the passage moves from one main idea to the next, so the sermon outline will follow the pattern already laid out in text. Narrative texts often work well with textual sermon outlines. Topical sermon outlines reorganize the data discovered from the text according to the main topics in the text. Poetic passages of Scripture usually work well with a topical approach since key ideas are often repeated in the poem. Keep in mind that no one approach is better than the other. Often it will depend on the particular passage and how it is structured. Either way, your ultimate goal is for your sermon to be understood with clarity and cogency.

In sum, the interpreter must study and learn the various literary forms found in the Bible. While some disagreement exists over how many genres are found in the Bible, the generally recognized ones include the

following: historical narrative, law, wisdom, poetry, prophecy, apocalyptic, discourse, gospel, parable, and epistle. The major genres of the Bible and how to preach them will be discussed in later chapters.

Life-Setting Analysis: When and Why Is It Being Said?

You have spent some quality time examining both the text and its surrounding literary context to discover the original meaning and purpose of the original human author for the original audience. At this point you will want to revisit your sermon proposition. Continue to hone both what you are trying to communicate regarding the unique truths about God from this text as well as how your hearers should respond. You can shorten it later to make it more memorable to your hearers. For now, you want to ensure it passes the test of clarity, conviction, and compassion. Is it comprehensible to the mind, credible to the heart, and applicable to life?

Now we turn to the last layer of textual analysis to discover the truth of the text according to the human author: life-setting analysis. Two main areas of analysis take place at this point: the general historical and cultural backdrop (when?), and the specific occasion and purpose (why?).

1. Examine *the general historical and cultural backdrop*. Knowing the historical and cultural backdrop of the time of writing can be crucial in understanding the meaning and significance of the author's words. For example, geographic locations as well as particular customs are often taken for granted by biblical authors since they know their readers will understand the reference. You will want to consult various resources that provide background information regarding the history and culture of the time in which the author was writing to this audience.¹⁵ We saw

15. Some helpful resources are Everett Ferguson, *Background on Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Clinton E. Arnold, ed.: *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002); Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

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earlier that the Bible refers to preachers as heralds. Investigating the history and culture of the original audience enables us to understand the analogy of preachers as heralds.

2. Examine *the specific occasion and purpose*. In addition to general information regarding historical and cultural backdrop, you will want to discover data regarding the original life context of the author, recipients, and circumstances, specifically, the occasion and purpose that prompted this text. What were some of the situational factors that caused the author to write? Were there specific sins, problems, and/or issues in the lives of the recipients that needed to be addressed? After examining this, you will want to make the “turn” to the present. Do my hearers face similar sins, problems, and issues today? As humans affected by sin and sin’s effects in the world, both the original recipients and my hearers need the grace and wisdom of God found in the revealed Word of God.¹⁶

At this point, you are attempting to discover what Bryan Chapell has helpfully called the original “fallen-condition focus” (FCF) of the text.¹⁷ In his helpful book on preaching, he states that the FCF “is the mutual human condition that contemporary believers share with those to or about whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage for God’s people to glorify and enjoy him.”¹⁸ Determining the FCF is vital, for it not only clarifies the meaning of the text for the original recipients but also conditions the significance of the sermon for our current hearers. The “problem” of sin and sin’s effects that need a “solution” in the gospel of Jesus Christ gives the entire sermon its unity and focus.¹⁹

16. Check your work by consulting helpful commentaries. To determine which commentaries to use, see the excellent annotated survey of commentaries for both the OT and the NT: Tremper Longman III, *Old Testament Commentary Survey*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007); D. A. Carson, *New Testament Commentary Survey*, 6th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007). The use of commentaries is purposely listed here at this point in the process so that you have had time to examine the text without too many preconceived ideas from other scholars. Nonetheless, checking your work against other scholars is an important safeguard against unintended errors. In addition to the principle that Scripture interprets other Scripture, we should also read the Scripture in the way the Christian church has read and interpreted Scripture for over 2,000 years.

17. This section is adapted from Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 48–55.

18. *Ibid.*, 50.

19. Chapell notes that specific sins that are explicitly addressed in the text are often the FCF on which the sermon will focus. Any of the prohibitions found in the Ten Commandments or in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, e.g., would be examples of sin that needs the grace of

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There are three questions to ask of the text to determine the FCF for both the original audience as well as our present ones.

What does the text say?

What spiritual concern(s) did this text address (in its context)?

What spiritual concerns do listeners share in common with those to (or about) whom the text was written?²⁰

Examining and identifying the specific occasion and purpose that gave rise to the words of the author is thus key in discovering the text's purpose for not only the original hearers but also for ours. Remember, this includes the preacher. How are my concerns or fears like the concerns and fears of the people in the text? What do I have in common with those being addressed in this text? How does this text comfort and/or challenge me? What is one thing the text is calling my hearers and me to do right now? The FCF is a helpful principle to draw connections between then and now in the application of scriptural truth.

As you formulate the FCF and its relationship to your sermon proposition, be cautious in determining parallels between the issues of the original recipients and the challenges our hearers face today. There will certainly be many areas of continuity since we share the same humanity in this sin-cursed world. There will also be discontinuity in the way the FCF manifests itself in unique cultural contexts.

Hopefully at this point, discovering the FCF of the text will propel you to discern the solution that only God's grace in the gospel can provide. Start thinking about the Christ-focused connection (CFC) of the text. How does the gospel of Jesus Christ solve the problem(s) introduced by the FCF? This will be discussed more in the next chapter. If the Bible is a unified story of God's grace found in the gospel of Jesus Christ for humans who are faced with the problem of sin and

God. But sin's effects on our lives and world can also be the FCF, e.g., issues such as the grief we experience because of the death of a loved one or the sickness many of us face. He states, "An FCF need not be something for which we are guilty or culpable. It simply needs to be an aspect or a problem of the human condition that requires the instruction, admonition, and/or comfort of Scripture" (*ibid.*, 50–51).

20. *Ibid.*, 52.

sin's effects, then every sermon needs to resolve in the gospel. This is done through the CFC. The CFC reveals how the good news of what Jesus accomplished through his life, death, and resurrection has radical implications to all of life's problems and concerns.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to provide a framework to help discover the truths of the text according to the human author. Three layers of interpretation are utilized to discover the original author's meaning and purpose for his audience. Through linguistic, literary, and life-setting analysis of the text, you are now able to determine the primary problem of the text that will require a solution in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So let's return to your sermon proposition and attempt another revision. Up to this point, the first half of this proposition was essentially God-centered, stating the main truth about God, who he is or what he has done (indicative). Let's rephrase it so that it is Christ-centered, focusing on who Christ is or what Christ has done. Earlier we used the example of 1 John 3:11–24 to determine a preliminary sermon proposition: “*Because* God loved us first, *then* we ought to love one another.” We can now modify this to become, “Because God loved us by sacrificing his Son, then we ought to love one another.” In this way, the truth of the good news of Jesus becomes the reason we should respond rightly.

The gospel thus provides the grounds, the motivation, and the power to think, feel, and live differently. Gospel-centered preaching is Christ-centered preaching. Every sermon from the whole counsel of God will have this focus. We turn now to learn how to discern Christ in the text according to the Divine Author.