

This is a great book. It brings together diverse and complementary voices from experienced expository preachers who are thoroughly committed to the Gospel. It is not a textbook. Its strength and freshness depend on the sweep of voices. This is not so much a book for students as for preachers – a book to savor, reading a chapter or two, then a few weeks later another chapter or two, and so on, so as to refresh your vision and practice.

D. A. Carson

Research Professor of New Testament,  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois

What a privilege pastors have in preaching the living Word of God each week. And here is a book to encourage us in that responsibility. Whether the reader is a pastor fresh out of seminary or a seasoned veteran of the pulpit, he will find these pages to be remarkably helpful and practical. Prepare to be inspired, challenged and exhorted.

Jason Helopoulos

Author of *A Neglected Grace*,  
Assistant Pastor, University Reformed Church, East Lansing, Michigan

In this valuable contribution to the art and science of preaching, Rhett Dodson has assembled a team of world-class expositors, each providing a sample sermon together with a fascinating fly-on-the-wall look at the preparation methods that produced them. While sometimes revealing the methodological idiosyncrasies of the preacher, the different approaches to sermon preparation nevertheless display a reassuring degree of overlap, driving home the point that, though personality, cultural context, and stylistic preferences may vary widely, faithful exposition will always aim at common goals (faithfulness to the text in its context, the nurture of believers, the conversion of the lost, the exaltation of God). Practical and encouraging, this volume will undoubtedly further the development of faithful preachers and faithful preaching, all to the glory and praise of the Lord.

David Strain

Senior Minister,  
First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi

I love touring the workshops of craftsmen, examining the tools, the sights, the sounds, the materials and the procedures that result in works of beauty and utility. Dodson gives us just such a tour of the workshops of talented preachers, enabling us to look over the shoulders of these master craftsmen of proclaimed truth in order to learn how we might produce messages reflecting the beauty and utility of their sermons.

Bryan Chapell

Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, Illinois

I have frequently attended Bible conferences to hear an accomplished expositor and, after my soul was fed by his preaching, I wanted to sit with him and have a conversation about *how* he did it. To what extent does he consult commentaries? How much does he think about illustrations? If the text has three common interpretations, does he tell the congregation all three, or just the one he thinks correct? And how much of what he does relies on creativity as opposed to merely restating the text? Is application necessary in the sermon?

*Unashamed Workmen* is like looking into the mind and over the shoulder of ten master expositors as they prepare, and then sitting in the audience as they deliver the fruits of their labors. The beauty of this project is that the reader can get answers, clearly noticing the differences of style and approach between the authors and yet also the one thing they hold in common: the primacy of the text.

Hershael W. York

Victor & Louise Lester Professor of Preaching,  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky  
Senior Pastor, Buck Run Baptist Church,  
Frankfort, Kentucky

# UNASHAMED WORKMEN

HOW EXPOSITORS  
PREPARE AND PREACH

EDITED BY  
RHETT DODSON

**MENTOR**

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*This book is dedicated to  
The Rev. Dr. Hughes Oliphant Old,  
Preacher of the Word of God  
and Chronicler of the History of Preaching  
with appreciation for his encouragement to extend my pulpit  
ministry through writing*

*and*

*To all my brothers who stand each week  
and proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ*



# CONTRIBUTORS

**Peter Adam** was born in Melbourne, Australia, and studied classical music. He then trained for the ministry at Ridley College Melbourne. Peter gained his MTh from King's College London, and his PhD from Durham University. His major ministries have included lecturing at St. John's College Durham, UK, serving in Melbourne as Vicar of St. Jude's Carlton and then as Principal of Ridley Melbourne. He has also served as Chaplain of Melbourne University, Archdeacon for Parish Development, and Canon of St. Paul's Cathedral. Peter is currently Vicar Emeritus of St. Jude's Carlton. Peter's publications include *Walking in God's Words: Reading Ezra and Nehemiah Today*, *The Message of Malachi*, *Written for Us: Receiving God's Words in the Bible*, *Hearing God's Words: Biblical Spirituality*, *The Majestic Son: A Commentary on Hebrews*, and *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching*. Peter continues his ministry of writing, encouraging people in ministry, speaking at conferences, preaching in churches, lecturing, supervising research students, and training preachers.

**Rhett Dodson** is the Senior Pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Hudson, Ohio. After completing BA and MA degrees in Bible, he earned a PhD in Old Testament Interpretation. Rhett previously served as an associate pastor and seminary professor.

In addition to articles and book reviews, he is the author of *This Brief Journey: Loving and Living the Psalms of Ascents* and *To Be a Pilgrim: Further Reflections on the Psalms of Ascents*. Originally from Pickens, South Carolina, Rhett and his wife, Theresa, live in Hudson.

**Iain Duguid** trained as an Electrical Engineer at Edinburgh University and served as a missionary in Liberia, West Africa, before studying for the ministry at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He completed a PhD in Old Testament at Cambridge University, and now teaches Old Testament and Hebrew at Grove City College in Pennsylvania. He also planted Christ Presbyterian Church (ARP), where he continues to serve on the pastoral staff.

**Ajith Fernando** served for thirty-five years as National Director of Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka, and now serves as its Teaching Director. His primary work includes mentoring, discipling, and counseling Youth for Christ leaders and pastors, and preaching and teaching mainly in gatherings of youth and Christian leaders. He serves as a visiting lecturer at Colombo Theological Seminary. He and his wife are also active in a Methodist Church, almost all of whose members are originally from other faiths. Ajith has written fifteen books, and his books have been translated into twenty languages.

**David Jackman** is a graduate in English literature from Cambridge University and studied theology at Trinity College, Bristol. After working for InterVarsity (UK) for six years, he served as Minister of Above Bar Church, Southampton (UK) through the late 1970s and 1980s, before becoming the founder/director of the Cornhill Training Course in London, in 1991. He served within the Proclamation Trust for many years in this capacity and ultimately as its President. Now retired, he remains active in preaching, writing, and training ministries around the world. He is married to Heather, and they have two married children and four grandchildren.

**Simon Manchester** trained at Moore College in Sydney Australia and served as assistant pastor in London before taking

up his position at St.Thomas, North Sydney in 1990. He has been privileged to speak at conferences at home and overseas and his weekly sermons are heard on Sydney radio. Married to Kathy, he has three grown up children.

**David Meredith** is senior minister at Smithton Church, Inverness, Scotland, a congregation of the Free Church of Scotland where he has served for thirty years. The church began as a plant and has grown to be one of the most influential in the denomination and in Scotland. David served as Moderator of the Free Church of Scotland in 2010 and is a frequent preacher at churches and conferences on both sides of the Atlantic. He names among his interests: motorcycles, travel, visiting graveyards and SEC football!

**Josh Moody** earned his PhD at Cambridge University and is Senior Pastor of College Church in Wheaton, Illinois. His books include *Journey to Joy*, *No Other Gospel*, and *The God-Centered Life*. More information may be found at [www.college-church.org](http://www.college-church.org) and [www.godcenteredlife.com](http://www.godcenteredlife.com).

**Douglas Sean O'Donnell** is Senior Lecturer at Queensland Theological College, Brisbane, Australia, and formerly senior pastor of New Covenant Church in Naperville, Illinois. He earned MA degrees at both Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Wheaton College. In addition to serving as an instructor for the Charles Simeon Trust, O'Donnell is a member of the North American Patristics Society, the US Board of the Irish Bible Institute, and the Society for the Advancement of Ecclesial Theology. He is the author of five books, including commentaries on the Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, and the Gospel of Matthew.

**Richard D. Phillips** is senior minister of Second Presbyterian Church in Greenville, SC. He is the author of over thirty books, including most recently a two-volume commentary on the Gospel of John. He is series co-editor of the Reformed Expository Commentary series, is chairman of the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology, and serves as a trustee of Westminster Theological Seminary. Dr. Phillips holds degrees from the University of Michigan (BA), University of Pennsylvania

Unashamed Workmen

(MBA), Westminster Theological Seminary (MDiv), and Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary (DD). He and his wife Sharon have five children.

## PREFACE

As a young Christian, one of the first Bible verses I memorized was 2 Timothy 2:15, “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (KJV). I took Paul’s admonition seriously and tried diligently to learn all that I could about the Bible. I knew it was important to study God’s Word in order to grow in my faith. Little did I know at the time that the Lord would call me to a life devoted to the study and proclamation of Scripture.

Paul’s injunction to Timothy sets the agenda for every pastor devoted to proclaiming the whole counsel of God. Preaching presupposes study, and diligent study is nothing if not the exertion of deliberate effort to understand the meaning and purpose of every passage of Scripture in its context. Sermons don’t just happen. They are the result of hard work in order to understand, explain, and apply a passage or passages to the people to whom you minister.

Such effort implies discipline. When Peter declared that he and the other apostles would devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4), he understood that such devotion would require planned diligence. And planned diligence requires, well, a plan.

Soon after I began to sense a call to preach, I purchased Warren Wiersbe’s *Walking with the Giants: A Minister’s Guide to*

*Good Reading and Great Preaching* (still one of my favorite books) and began to learn about the great preachers of the past. “How did they do it?” I wondered. How does one get from a passage in the Bible to a full-fledged sermon in the pulpit? Wiersbe’s vignettes of the great preachers were helpful. G. Campbell Morgan’s early morning diligence inspired me to work hard. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones’s robust, Reformed, consecutive exposition moved me to make preaching primary in my ministry. And a single quotation from John Hall’s 1874–75 Yale Lectures on Preaching has remained with me as a motto, indeed a *vade mecum* of proclamation in two clauses: “We are not, gentlemen, heathen philosophers finding out things; we are expositors of a revelation that settled things.”

But the “how?” question remained. I asked questions, read what I could find, and headed off to university to pursue a degree in Biblical studies. Along the way, I found helpful examples in many of the preachers I got to know, in books on preaching, and a course in homiletics. My first efforts at preaching were dubious at best, and my method of sermon preparation was worse—I had no method. But eventually the pieces started to come together, and I developed a more systematic approach that has worked for me. You’ll find it described later in the book.

Through the years I’ve remained interested in the “how?” question. And I’ve discovered that I’m not alone. Preachers and would-be preachers are often interested in the way that others go about the process. Homiletics textbooks can be very helpful in taking you through the various parts of a sermon, but it can often be difficult to know just how to start and work through the homiletic principles and put them into practice in a regular, week in, week out preaching ministry.

My interest in the “how?” question has led to the book you hold in your hands. Several years ago it occurred to me that it would be very helpful to assemble a team of men to explain the way they go about preparing their sermons, what tools they use, and the questions that remain uppermost in their minds as they work from text to talk. I also thought it would be helpful to include an example of an expository sermon so that one might follow the process from the study to the pulpit. With that idea

in mind, I began to seek out contributors, and the end result is before you.

The plan of the book is simple. Each author contributes two chapters in which he describes his regular method of preparing to preach and then provides you with a sample sermon. You will find here a variety of approaches in the way men prepare to preach and a variety of styles in the way they preach, but the overriding concern of each is that the Word of God be explained and applied clearly so that Jesus Christ is exalted. In the preparation chapters, some men will walk you through a typical week of study while others focus more on asking key questions or the use of certain tools. The sermons cover a variety of biblical passages. Several authors chose Old Testament texts, while three messages are from the Gospels. And Josh Moody chose a compelling passage from Revelation. The sermon I've included has a decided evangelistic thrust to demonstrate that evangelism can be done through exposition. While it was impossible to cover all of the genres that occur in the Bible, the diversity found here should prove helpful.

Each author expresses his own method and his own opinions about preaching. You may find that you agree, disagree, or aren't quite sure. But what you will find is a wealth of experience to glean from, debate with, and, hopefully, grow through as a herald of God's Word so that your progress becomes evident to all (1 Tim. 4:15).

If you haven't yet developed a method of sermon preparation, my prayer is that these chapters will inspire you to cultivate a systematic way to pursue your studies. "Ministerial study is a *sine qua non* of success. It is absurdly useless to talk of methods of preaching, where there is no method of preparation."<sup>1</sup> If you already have a fairly set way that you go about getting from a passage to the sermon, I hope that you will find ways here to improve your preparation process or, at the very least, be inspired to work harder at the task. The Rev. Dr. William Fitch, sometime pastor of Knox Presbyterian Church in Toronto, wrote, "There is a craftsmanship in preaching that fully repays the study we give to it."<sup>2</sup>

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1. J. W. Alexander, *Thoughts on Preaching* (1864; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 167.
  2. "The Glory of Preaching" in *Christianity Today*, January 20, 1967.

My desire is that you will find in this book a personable companion to the standard homiletics texts that will encourage you to work hard, pray hard, and preach with all the strength God gives you. I also hope that professors of preaching will find this volume helpful supplemental reading for their courses. These chapters will put flesh on the bones—the principles of homiletics—and encourage students that these bones can indeed live in the pulpit ministry of the church!

Each of the men who have contributed to this volume is engaged in a full-time preaching ministry, and some of them carry out this ministry internationally. I am thankful that they have thought this task worthy to take time out of their busy schedules to contribute to this volume. I also want to thank the Rev. Dr. Malcolm Maclean and the good folks of Christian Focus Publications for their belief in this book and the diligent effort they have extended to publish it.

The challenge that lies before us is to preach the Word (2 Tim. 4:2). May the Lord use this book in your life and ministry so that you do so as an unashamed workman who rightly handles the Word of truth.

Should you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact me at [unashamedworkmen@gmail.com](mailto:unashamedworkmen@gmail.com).

Rhett Dodson  
Hudson, Ohio  
February 2014

# 1 What is God's Word for these people?

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PETER ADAM

I work on my sermons by asking questions, because they get my mind working. What does God say in this text to these people? What does He want them to learn, to remember, to know? How does He want them to change, and what does He want them to do? What impact does God intend today for this congregation from these words?

As we begin, there are two things you should know. First, as will become evident throughout this chapter, the part of the Bible that has influenced me most in thinking about preaching is 2 Timothy 3:15–4:2.<sup>1</sup> Second, I think of sermon preparation in three stages:

- Preparation for preaching,
- Working on the sermon, and
- Reviewing the sermon

## **Preparation for Preaching**

The first set of questions has to do with the preliminary work to prepare to preach. Answering these questions calls for personal discipline and pastoral wisdom.

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1. For more ideas on 2 Timothy for preachers, see my “The Pastor as Preacher” in Melvin Tinker, ed., *The Renewed Pastor: Essays on the Pastoral Ministry in Honour of Philip Hacking* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications: Mentor, 2011), 67-82.

*1. How is God currently changing me to make me into a preacher?*

Being a preacher requires ever-increasing Biblical intelligence, emotional intelligence, theological intelligence, and pastoral intelligence. Of course, by intelligence I mean alert and perceptive wisdom. I don't mean cleverness but depth of understanding and wisdom.

I need to be growing all the time in knowing and understanding the Bible. I need to know my Bible more and more, and not think to myself, "Well, I know it all now." And I need to be continually reformed and changed by the Bible.

I need to be growing all the time in emotional intelligence. God wants to transform people, and I want my sermons to aid that process. God understands our emotional complexities, and I need to do the same. Most people are governed by their emotions. Just as emotions can be barriers to transforming grace, so also emotions can fuel our transformation. To be an effective preacher, I need a pastor's heart. I need to love the people I am preaching to and to understand them and the things that shape them: personality, experience, family, work, and social and political context. I must serve people, love them, rejoice with them and weep with them. Preaching is ministry, not performance.

I need to be growing all the time in theological intelligence. I need to understand the deep structures of Christianity, and the deep intellectual structures of society. I need to be alert to the theological meaning of Scripture, and the theological significance of society's current ideas, assumptions, practices, strengths, sins, and trends. I need to be able to do theological analysis, not just sociological analysis, psychological analysis, or political analysis.

I need to be growing all the time in pastoral intelligence. Pastoral intelligence is a combination of Biblical, emotional, and theological intelligence. All Christians need pastoral intelligence to care for each other and love their neighbors. Preachers need pastoral intelligence, not just about individuals, but also about groups. Preachers need wisdom to understand how people function as members of churches, the dynamics of their relationships and relational structures. Our aim is not just to transform individuals, but to transform churches.

We need to be Biblically, emotionally, theologically, and pastorally wise to understand the Bible, to understand people, and to serve people in our sermons.<sup>2</sup>

*2. How will I set time and energy aside to focus on sermon preparation?*

I need to set aside time and energy for the creative act of preparing and preaching a sermon. Routine tasks take less energy. Creative tasks like preparation and preaching take lots of energy.

People may want us to preach great sermons, but may underestimate the time needed to prepare great sermons! Or they may want us to spend all our time doing administration, being constantly available, and constantly visiting! If we want to preach, we need to find time to prepare.

I need uninterrupted time, so I clear the diary, turn off the phones and email, and clear the desk of all other material. Of course the moment I start preparing, I think of many other things I should be doing, so I keep a list on the desk, and as soon as one of these comes into my mind I put it on the list, and get back to work!

And I need to be self-disciplined so that I don't waste time in preparation, by following up interesting by-ways that will not help the sermon, or by sitting there achieving nothing!

I find that if I spend ten hours in sermon preparation, it is best to do that in three or four blocks on successive days, rather than spending a whole day at a time on this task. This keeps me fresher, and helps me make good use of my subconscious, which keeps on working on the problems and challenges of the sermon when I am doing other things. I have my best ideas when I am not at my desk! And if I meet a particular problem, I leave my desk and go for a walk, and the solution will often come to me as I do so.

For each sermon, I allocate half of the preparation time to the Scripture passage, and half of the time to the people. My natural tendency is to spend all the time studying the Scripture, and no

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2. My first and last questions are about my readiness for ministry, because who we are as people is fundamental to the ministry we do. For more, see my *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching* (Vancouver: Regent, 2004), 157-72.

time on the people. Those sermons always end with the words, “And may God show us how to put this into practice in our own lives,” which is code for, “I have no idea.”

And I pray. I pray that God will help me understand this Bible passage, and I pray for the people who will hear it. I pray that God will help me to shape the sermon so that the people I am preaching to will be able to receive it, understand it, and make good use of it. I pray that God will increase my love for the Bible passage, and my love for the people to whom I will preach. For I know that it is not enough to love preaching: I must love God’s words and love God’s people. And I ask God to help me to preach for His glory, not to meet my own needs, or to win approval from the people.<sup>3</sup>

By the way, if some preachers do not do enough preparation, others do too much! This may happen because they are perfectionists, because they don’t use their time efficiently, or because they have absorbed the idea that ministers should spend all their time in the study, after the example of the great Jonathan Edwards.<sup>4</sup>

### *3. Am I preaching the full range of Scripture?*

When we plan our preaching program, it is important that we preach the Old Testament as well as the New. In His wisdom, God has kindly provided twice as much Old Testament as New Testament, because He knows we need it. People can’t understand the New Testament without the Old Testament, and they can’t fully understand Christ without the Old Testament. The basic building blocks of Christianity are taught in the Old Testament. There we learn that there is one God, the creator, who rules the world; that everyone is made in God’s image; that everyone is under God’s judgment. We learn that God is a God of promise, that God pours out His electing and covenant love, and provides us with instruction, law, and wisdom. We learn that

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3. Of course, I sometimes preach to people and congregations I do not know. I always ask the minister what the people need in terms of the Scripture to preach from, and their current needs. I pray for them, ignorant of who they are, but trusting that God will give me pastoral insight.
  4. For people of modest intellectual ability like ourselves, this would be an indulgence. See my *Speaking God’s Words*, 160-65.

we should not worship other gods, nor should we worship the creation. We hear God's call to honor Him in every part of our lives. We see that God rules the nations, and plans to bring the nations to know and serve Him. These things are clearly taught in the Old Testament, and assumed in the New. Believers today need to know the Old Testament.

We should also choose to preach unfamiliar and difficult books of the Bible. If we don't preach these books, our people will be nervous about reading them. We should be stretching our congregations, as well as showing them how to tackle new or difficult parts of the Bible. One advantage of preaching unfamiliar books is that people say, "I never heard that before", rather than, "I know all that already"!

#### *4. What book of the Bible does this congregation need?*

We choose which books of the Bible to preach in the light of educational strategy and pastoral need. Our educational strategy is to teach the congregation the breadth and depth of the Bible, God's syllabus for the human race. We need to ask ourselves such things as: What parts of the Bible do they need to know? What balance of Old and New Testaments? How can I show them the inner connections of the Bible and its developing themes (for example linking Leviticus and Hebrews, or Ezekiel and John, or Exodus with Isaiah and with Mark, or Exodus with Revelation)? We need an overall educational strategy for our church, remembering that our church will include enquirers and unbelievers.

We should also keep in mind pastoral needs. If our people need a good dose of creation theology and teaching on the providence and promises of God, then preach Genesis. If they need encouragement under pressure, preach Job. If they need wisdom for daily life, preach Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, or James. If they are facing heresy, then preach Jeremiah, Galatians, or Jude. If they need to know the person and work of Christ, then preach a Gospel or Colossians.

Our preaching should be intentional, not just in individual sermons, but in our overall plan. My plan for the year would often include one Old Testament book, one gospel, and one other New Testament book, including one difficult book. I also

include a topical series. This could be theological topics, to give a theological overview of Biblical teaching, or topics from daily life. I do the latter, because I want to train people to be useful in daily conversation, and to be able to answer questions like, “What do Christians think about divorce?” “What do you think about social inequality?” “What do you believe about the new Atheism?” “Do dogs go to heaven?” We need to model how to answer these questions if we want our people to be well equipped to talk with their neighbors and friends.<sup>5</sup>

*5. What is the message of the whole book of the Bible in which this passage occurs?*

I try to do this as I prepare for my next year’s ministry. My usual practice is to spend a year with a book of the Bible, to soak myself in it, prepare it, and then preach it. If not, I will need to spend a whole week immersed in a book. Finding the *central ministry purpose* of a book of the Bible is essential preparation for all the sermons.

The central ministry purpose of the book is its ministry aim, its pastoral intention. It is the answer to the question that we could ask of the author of the book: “In one sentence, why did you write this book?” Or the answer to the question we could ask of God: “Why did you cause this book to be written?” A statement of the central ministry purpose should include not only the central theme, but also how and why readers should act in response. It uses the language of action, not analysis.

The *text* is the book. It is odd to refer to isolated verses of Scripture as *texts*. The real texts of Scripture are of course the complete books that make up the Scriptures. Preaching books of the Bible takes the God-given book and the God-chosen method of revelation seriously. It respects the human author of the book and is culturally appropriate, because most people naturally read books from beginning to end. It also models a good way to read the Bible.

A big investment of time in working on the message and content of a whole book of the Bible is really worth it, not least

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5. For more on the role of the Bible in preaching see my *Speaking God’s Words*, 13-56, 87-124.

because when I have done this work, each individual sermon is much easier and quicker to prepare.

Some Bible books make it easy for us, because they tell us clearly and succinctly why they were written, for example in John 20:30-31; Colossians 2:6-7; 1 Timothy 3:14-15, and Jude 4. In other books we have to look for common themes, common words, common ideas. We expect to find the main ministry purpose of a book of the Bible in each of the main sections of the book, and at the natural climaxes of the book.<sup>6</sup> It is often hard work, but it is always well worth it.<sup>7</sup>

You can begin an expository sermon series by preaching on the main purpose of the book, basing the sermon on the key passage which expresses that purpose. This helps people know what to expect, and gives them an overview of the book. Over the following weeks you can then go to the beginning of the book, and begin the consecutive exposition.

#### *6. How will I divide this book into preachable units?*

We need literary, educational, and pastoral wisdom to make this decision. It is possible to preach a whole book in one sermon. I have done so with Jude; I have even done it with Job! As I divide up the book into the passages to preach, I keep the following issues in mind:

- I don't want to go so slowly through the text that I lose momentum and meaning, and lose the impact of the whole book, or end up giving a Biblical theology of every word in the text.
- I don't want to use a style of exegesis and preaching that suits a densely-argued epistle when the literary style of the book demands larger units such as chapters.

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6. See my "Finding the Central Ministry Purpose of a Book of the Bible" at <http://www.niministryassembly.org.uk/docs/NIMA-2008-02-Handout-Peter-Adam.pdf> (accessed Feb. 10, 2014).

7. Some commentaries are helpful, but many are not. Those that are not are those that focus on the words, but not the meaning, those that neglect theology, or those that tackle the theology, but not the pastoral purpose of the theology, the pastoral purpose of the book.

- I don't want to provoke the congregation by demanding from them more than they can manage. I once preached for nine months on Hebrews, but did it in three three-month segments with a break between the segments. Parents should not provoke their children, and preachers should not provoke their people! We should challenge our people to grow but not discourage them by setting unbearable standards!
- I do want to vary my expository speed so that each year I will include one slow and detailed exposition (of a dense passage), one medium speed exposition, and one overview exposition, such as the book of Revelation in six sermons.
- I don't want passages that are too short to make full sense or too long to be manageable.
- If the book is so long that it is not easily preached, then either I take it in two or three segments, and do one segment each year. Or else I preach some chapters, and provide studies on the other chapters for home groups and individuals.

### **Working on the Sermon**

After asking and answering these initial, preparatory questions, it is time to begin work on the actual sermon. This work involves a number of additional questions.

*1. Am I making my two journeys, the first to the text, and the second to the people who will be present?*

During my preparation I need to take two journeys. I have to travel back to the passage in its original context. Commentaries are helpful in this process. Studying the passages in the original languages emphasizes that these are not contemporary documents. What did this passage mean originally? I have to set aside what I want to find and set aside contemporary issues. I must enter the world of the writer and those who received the writing to find the message.

Then I have to travel to the world of the congregation, remembering that this could include enquirers and unbelievers. What should I do with the message of this text for this people? How can I help them to travel back with me to the world of the text, and then return to their own lives and their life as a congregation, with the message of this text?

Sometimes I find these journeys difficult, but both journeys are necessary. Without the first, my preaching will be superficial, because it will not be based on the Bible. Without the second, my preaching will be superficial, because it will be information, not transformation.

*2. What insights can I get from the three contexts of the passage?*

The three contexts of the passage are the following:

First, the immediate context of the passage. I need to keep in mind the flow and progression of the book, and especially the immediate context of the passage. I will have a clearer idea about the message of the passage if I know its context. Why does it begin where it does? What happens next?

Second, the context of the book of the Bible. I have already covered this exercise above, but I need to keep referring back to the pastoral purpose of the whole book to understand this part of it. A book of the Bible is like a sentence, and each part of the sentence has its meaning in the context of the whole sentence. This is often a neglected context, so you must keep it in mind.

Third, the context of the whole Bible. This context shows us how the passage relates to Biblical Theology, the unfolding verbal revelation of God. By employing Biblical Theology, we can see how each part fits into the larger picture of the whole Bible and how God's self-revelation moves from promise to fulfillment. I make good use of cross-references, and I read one new book on Biblical Theology a year, to keep this perspective fresh in my mind.

If I am getting stuck on a passage, I often find that looking at these three contexts sparks my imagination!

*3. What did this passage mean for the people to whom it was written?*

Some books of the Bible were written as letters, and the question is simply what did the writer of the letter intend for the people to whom it was written. Other books of the Bible are different, in that they contain words for people other than those for whom the book was written, such as the disciples and the crowds to whom Jesus spoke His words, or the people of God on the plains of Moab who heard Moses's sermons in Deuteronomy.

I find it very useful to ask, “What did this mean for the people for whom it was *written*?” “What did Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John intend when they recounted Jesus’s words?” “What was the purpose of Deuteronomy, or Judges, or Ruth for the people for whom they were *written*?” If I am struggling with application, then the “Why was it *written*?” question is very productive.

#### *4. How does this passage apply to this congregation?*

All of Scripture is relevant and important for God’s people. I need, however, to think clearly about how this passage applies to these people today. It may be immediately relevant or generally relevant.

Consider, for example, Malachi 3:8: “Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me.” That may be immediately relevant, because the congregation is casual and negligent in their giving to God. If so, I preach it directly to them. But if the congregation is actually generous and self-sacrificial (like the church at Macedonia in 2 Corinthians 8:1-7), then it would be wrong to say that they were robbing God when they were not. So why is it worth preaching Malachi 3 to this godly congregation? To warn them of the danger of drifting into this pattern of behavior; to challenge any individuals who are not generous to God; to train people to know how to help stingy Christians they meet; and train them to know what to pray for churches which are stingy.

This is why preaching takes pastoral intelligence, because we have to know how immediately the passage applies to my congregation. So, from another perspective, if there is conflict in the church, which passage of Scripture applies most immediately? Is it Galatians 1? This passage tackles the life and death issue of gospel clarity. Is it Romans 14 and 15? This deals with issues about which Christians may differ, reminding them that they must welcome each other and not judge each other. Is it Philippians 4:2? This is about getting along with others. It would be wrong to apply Romans 14 in a Galatians 1 situation, as it would be wrong to apply Galatians 1 in a Philippians 4 situation.

We need the same pastoral intelligence in one-to-one ministry. Imagine you are taking a new Christian through John’s Gospel, and the person is ill. You would need to think carefully when you

reach John 5:14 (the man had been paralyzed because of his sin), and again when you reach John 9:3 (the man's blindness was not the result of his sin). Which applies to the person? The book of Job is a great warning that a general truth (people suffer because of their sin) does not apply directly in every situation! Preachers need the pastoral intelligence that Job's friends lacked!

To apply Scripture incorrectly is a failure in *pastoral intelligence*. It may also be an example of an inadequate understanding of the whole of Scripture. Preachers often practice *inappropriate universalization*. This is when we take what a passage says and apply it as though it was the only teaching of the Bible on this subject. But the whole Bible may give a variety of messages. Take suffering as an example. Believers may suffer because of their sin (John 5:14); because God wants to prove their endurance (Job); because Satan is attacking them (1 Pet. 5); because Satan is attacking them and God uses that attack to teach them of strength perfected in weakness (2 Cor. 12); for the sake of gospel growth (Acts 9:16); because they are godly (2 Tim. 3:12); because of the sin of others (Gen. 37); or so that they are able to share God's consolation with others (2 Cor. 1). Make sure you hear all that the Bible has to say on a topic so that you don't universalize the passage you are preaching.

### 5. *What does this passage mean for the people of God?*

Most books in the Bible were addressed to the people of God, not to individuals. We in the Western world have been brainwashed into individualism. We think and feel as individuals, we regard individuals as the most important form of human life, we privilege individuals over communities, and so we read and preach the Bible as if it was addressed to individuals.

Most books of the Bible address the people of God. Deuteronomy comprises sermons to Israel as a nation. Paul wrote most of his letters to churches. Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus are primarily about the life of the churches, and his letter to Philemon was also addressed to "the church in your house" (Philem. 2). Although Luke and Acts were written for Theophilus (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1), it was common practice to dedicate writings to an important person, while keeping a wider audience in mind.

“Scripture is God preaching,”<sup>8</sup> and in the Bible God is mainly preaching to His people. We should follow what God has done, and address the book we are preaching to the church of our day. Our first question should be, “What is God saying to us?” Not, “What is God saying to me?” or “What is God saying to individuals in the congregation?” So rather than looking for individual application, we should work for corporate application. *Corporate* here does not mean big business, it means *body*, as in “the body of Christ.” We should train ourselves to look for the shared values of our churches, our shared godliness, our shared sins, our shared blind spots, our shared weaknesses, our shared strengths.

This kind of preaching does not diminish individual responsibility; in fact, it increases it. So if the text says, “We should love one another” (1 John 3:11), then it is not enough for me as an individual to love others in the church. I must also work, pray and encourage until all the members of the church love one another! And I must also work, pray, and encourage the leadership of the church to demonstrate that love, to model it to the church, to encourage members of the church to love one another, and to challenge those who don’t love one another to repent and change their ways.

This way of thinking about the Bible and the sermon also means that we must be patient enough to learn things that we don’t need ourselves, but which God teaches us so that we are ready to teach, help, or train someone else, or answer the questions that they ask.

#### *6. Am I making the most of the passage of Scripture I am preaching?*

Finding the *meaning* of the Bible passage is worth doing, but it is also worth asking, “How does this Bible passage convey this message?” What methods, what ingredients are here, and how can I use them in my preaching? These include the following key ingredients: structure, images, stories or illustrative language, motivations, emotions, key words, arguments, evidence, and contrasts. Looking for all of these alerts me to what is in the

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8. J.I. Packer, *God Has Spoken* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 97.

passage and how its message is communicated. I want to pick up all the clues I can for my sermon. I find commentaries useful here and also the original languages.<sup>9</sup>

- I look for structure, because I want the congregation to engage with the beginning of the passage and follow the journey of the passage to its conclusion.
- I look for images, stories, or illustrative language because these provide useful illustrations for the sermon. They project the meaning of the passage and should work well in the sermon.
- I look for motivations, because I want to avoid the default motivation beloved of evangelical preachers, that of obeying instructions (unless it is present in the passage!). The Bible uses many other motivations, such as seeing the danger, pleasing God, making sensible decisions, avoiding looking foolish, making wise long-term decisions. Find them, and use them!
- I look for emotions, because they will tell me what style of preaching I should use and help me engage the congregation.
- I look for key words in the passage, so that I can use them in the sermon. This reinforces the power of the sermon and helps people see that the Bible and the sermon connect.
- I look for arguments and evidence because I want the congregation to know why they should do what the passage urges them to do.
- I look for contrasts. These contrasts are those within the passage, and also the contrasts between what the passage says and what I think or expect, or between what the passage says and what the congregation thinks or expects.

My aim is to include the content and style of the passage, as well as its message: or rather, to use the content and style of the

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9. Useful commentaries have three characteristics: they focus on the text of the Bible, not on the comments of other commentators; they tackle the theological issues of the text, not just the linguistics; and they are not too detailed or too long! I make good use of one-volume Bible commentaries, because they often give a concise overview of the book and the passage.

passage in order to convey its message. And I want to avoid the default evangelical application, which is that we should read the Bible more and do what it says. This is satisfactory if it is the message of the passage of Scripture, but otherwise it obscures what God intends to achieve through this particular part of the Bible.

I try to avoid expression like “preach a sermon”, or “teach the Bible.” I want to use the Bible to “reprove, rebuke, and exhort” (2 Tim. 4:2).

*7. Am I rightly serving the two purposes of Scripture: one, to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus, and two, to teach, reprove, correct, and train in righteousness?*

These two purposes are based on Paul’s words in 2 Timothy 3:15-17. What God joins together, we should not separate. It is useful to distinguish between these two uses but not to separate them. Some preachers focus on one and neglect the other. I want to achieve both purposes.

First, the Scriptures make us wise for salvation through Christ. “And he said to them, ‘O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:25-27).

Second, the Scriptures teach us how to live in response to Christ. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians he warned them from the history of God’s people in their wilderness wanderings. “Now these things ... were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:11).

And again, “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).

Indeed, Scripture shows us how a saving act may also serve as an example for us to follow. In 1 Peter 2:18-25, Christ through His sufferings provided a unique act of atonement. “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin

and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.” (v. 24). But these same sufferings are also an example to follow. “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (v. 21).

We need to distinguish between these two uses of the sufferings of Christ, but not separate them. They are distinguishable, but not mutually contradictory. Of course imitating Christ's sufferings does not save us, but saved people should follow Christ's example!

We should use the Bible to preach the gospel to unbelievers and believers, and also to teach people how to live.

*8. Have I pruned and shaped my sermon to make it more effective, and how will I engage the people in this sermon?*

Too many words, too many ideas, too little structure, and too little purpose make sermons difficult to listen to. If the sermon is not focused and intentional, it will have little impact. I need to prune away good ideas (often two-thirds of the good things I have found!) to sharpen the sermon. I find it useful near the end of my preparation to say to myself, “What I really want to tell them is....” and then sharpen the sermon for that purpose.

It is my job to engage the congregation, to help them listen, understand, and pay attention. I must use language that is designed to be heard, not read, with more clarity, and with more emphasis of the important points. I need to think about my listeners and how they may need help at challenging or difficult moments in the sermon, by using an illustration, an application, a memorable phrase, a self-disclosure, or arresting language. In particular, I find applicatory illustrations, that is illustrations that show what it is like to put this passage into practice, most useful. For the main point of a sermon, I might use three applications: one to clarify, one to motivate, and one to apply. I also need to decide when to give the application: at the end, scattered through the sermon, or at the beginning.<sup>10</sup> I try not to follow the same outline each week, but to vary my approach as much as I can.

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10. See my *Speaking God's Words*, 97-102.

As I shape my sermon, I ensure that I think through the range of people who will be present; from unbelievers to mature saints, from the ignorant to the edified, from the lapsed to the mature. I want to make sure that I engage them all.

## **Reviewing the sermon**

Before I preach, I need to review the sermon. Here are the two questions I ask at that point.

### *1. Have I succeeded in the nine engagements necessary for good preaching?*

We learn to preach by learning from good examples. I have learned much from studying John Calvin's sermons. Calvin helped to refashion expository preaching, and he provides a great example for us. His preaching involved nine deep engagements.<sup>11</sup> Any one of these is demanding; to combine all nine engagements is very demanding. But this provides a standard I set myself in my preaching, and also provides nine useful questions to ask about any sermon that I preach. Will this sermon:

- Help the congregation engage with God?
- Engage with the Bible?
- Engage in theology?
- Engage my own humanity in my preaching?
- Engage with the congregation?
- Engage the congregation as hearers?
- Engage in training the congregation in holiness and usefulness?
- Engage in training them to support God's gospel plan?
- Engage in training up future preachers?

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11. See my "Preaching of a Lively Kind': Calvin's engaged expository preaching" in *Engaging With Calvin: Aspects of the Reformer's Legacy for Today*, ed. Mark D. Thompson, (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009) and also "Calvin's Preaching and Homiletic: Nine Engagements, Part 1", *Churchman*, 124:3, 2010 and "Calvin's Preaching and Homiletic: Nine Engagements, Part 2", *Churchman*, 124:4, 2010.

What is God's Word for these people?

*2. Am I ready to preach this sermon?*

Again, I must ask myself questions.

Do I love the part of the Bible I am to preach? Do I love the people, and am I ready to serve them? Am I ready to "reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:2)? Have I prayed that God will help me understand and teach the Bible rightly? Have I prayed for the people who will hear, that God will use this passage of the Bible and my sermon to convert, transform, build up, and equip them for life and ministry?

Have I preached this sermon to myself? Are there sins I need to confess before I preach it to others? Do I trust that God will use His Spirit-inspired words of the Bible to do His gracious work? Do I trust that God will use my words for His glory? Am I ready to honor God in my ministry and preach before Him (2 Tim. 4:1)? Am I ready to "preach the Word" (2 Tim. 4:2)?

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