

“The Privilege of Preaching” -- by Mark Blair, 2004

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Chapter 1 - Why Preach? - The Need for Preaching

This book is for preachers. If you are just beginning to preach, I hope to point you in the right direction. If you've been on the job for a long time, I hope you'll be encouraged to keep going, reminded of familiar truths, and even challenged by some new ideas. This book, like most of my sermons, contains lots of good ideas I have borrowed from others, and even a few of my own. I have gathered the material over a quarter century of preaching, and teaching about preaching, in America, Uganda, and now in Kazakhstan. I write about preaching with great confidence in our God who graciously enables us to proclaim His truth. Yet, I have a great consciousness that I do not always practice the high ideals I recommend here.

I am now a co-pastor of a church in Kazakhstan. My fellow pastor was recently away for a couple months and I had the privilege of preaching every week. Upon his return we met to update him on the ministry. When he asked about my preaching I could not remember all the messages I had preached, a couple I completely forgot! How could I spend many hours preparing a message, just a few weeks before, and remember neither text nor title? Had all my efforts helped anyone? Can any of my hearers remember what I preached even last Sunday? Despite my faulty memory, I am convinced, from Scripture and experience, that the preparation of sermons is the best use of the pastor's time. Let me try and explain -- Why preach?

On a crisp clear autumn day marathon runners from far and wide gather to race. Supported by devoted families, hardened by years of training, the lean and sinewy athletes set off. As the race winds on, their bodies grow weary and their thirst rages. Finally, the dehydrated competitors come to a "thirst aid" station. Cheering throngs hold paper cups filled with cool water. Passing runners grab and gulp as they continue their course. Some grab two cups, one to drink, another to drench their heads. As the marathoners pass out of sight, a sea of empty cups litters the road. Renewed by their contents, runners just toss the cups down and speed on. More cups would be waiting at the next station. Instead of cups, now imagine pages of sermon notes - scattered on the ground. Those who run by are struggling saints and sinners - all needing His "living water." They are engaged in the marathon of life, with all its twists and turns. Stumbling, sometimes falling, they move forward by grace through faith. You hold out needed refreshment from your "thirst aid" preaching point. The treasure of God's Word is held in the disposable vessel of your sermon. They grasp and gulp and plod on, week after week. No one cheers the empty cups, nor should they, but all heaven rejoices with the believer who has finished the race. And God used you - and your sermon - to help them win.

The Most Important Task of the Pastor is to Preach

Consider the Apostle Paul's inspiring example as a faithful preacher. Traveling eastward across the Aegean Sea from Corinth, he arrived on the coast of the Roman province of Asia (which today is Turkey) between 52 and 55 AD. He made two visits to the coastal city of Ephesus (Acts 18.19-21). This city was located five-and-a-half kilometers up the Cayster River from the Sea. The Apostle to the Gentiles came to this city of more than 250,000 people who needed Jesus. When he arrived, he found some who had a partial knowledge of the way of God -- the teaching of John the Baptist. (John lived historically on the other side of Jesus' saving work, while Paul was an Apostle of the New Covenant.) So Paul introduced these Ephesians to the full blessing of Jesus and His Spirit (Acts 19.1-7). He realized the people of Ephesus needed clear teaching from the Scripture. Beginning in the Jewish

synagogue, Paul preached the Kingdom of God. For three months Paul “spoke boldly” and “argued persuasively”(Acts 19.8). Some of his listeners opposed the message and he left that gathering (Acts 19.9). So -- let the preacher understand that not everyone will receive the message with joy. It is the smell of death to those who are perishing (2 Corinthians 2.14-17). Though man closed the door to the Gospel in that synagogue, God opened another and wider door for Paul. He got permission to preach in a lecture hall of that city. He explained the Scriptures to many there every day for two years (Acts 19.10). In the light of Paul’s example, I wonder if we preachers set our sights high enough. When we think of preaching we may just think of the few who gather on Sunday mornings in our churches. Paul wanted the entire city of Ephesus to hear. This lecture hall of Tyrannus was a well-known place. People from all religions and walks of life could freely attend. When Jonah preached, all of Nineveh heard God’s Word, from the king and his nobles to the slaves and their animals. When John Calvin sought Reformation for Geneva, he preached the Word daily to all its citizens. Yet note well that when you want to preach Jesus to a city, you may face its furious rejection. Thousands of Ephesians joined the mob and screamed for two hours against Paul and his Gospel (Acts 19.23-20.1). Just as Calvin was forced from Geneva in 1538, likewise Paul fled Ephesus.

Months later, Paul’s travels again took him near the city of Ephesus. He could not pass by without seeing at least the church leaders. As far as he knew this would be their last meeting on earth. As he met these elders on the coastal shore, he recounted his three years of work in their city. His preaching ministry was the dominant theme of this review: “I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus...I consider my life worth nothing to me, if I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given to me - the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace...I have gone about preaching the kingdom...I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God” (Acts 20.20,21,24,25,27). Preaching, preaching, preaching, day and night, in joy and tears, publicly and from house to house, this is what Paul did in Ephesus. Paul’s departure does not close the church. God raises new leaders to preach. The Church advances like a relay race, one runner hands the Gospel baton to another. Now Paul hands over this baton to the Ephesian elders who must run their lap of ministry. So he tells them to keep on preaching. Another image he uses is of a shepherd protecting his sheep from the wolves’ savage attack (Acts 20.28-31). This referred to false teachers who would come with destructive errors to hurt the believers. The Ephesians’ weapon of strong protection is “God and the word of his grace” (Acts 20.32, Ephesians 6.17). God’s Word will build up believers and churches today. Biblical preaching remains divine protection from modern wolves that tear away at our faith.

Nearly ten years after his departure from Ephesus, about 65 AD, Paul was ready to make his departure from this world (2 Timothy 4.6). He was a Roman prisoner under sentence of death. Luke had described Paul’s success in Ephesus; saying, “All the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19.10). Ten years later the report was not so positive. The aged apostle Paul wrote from his prison cell that, “everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me” (2 Timothy 1.15). The once-flourishing Ephesian church had forsaken their first love (Revelation 2.4). If preaching were just a human enterprise, Paul could be considered a failure. Many of his contemporaries thought Paul’s gospel would die with him. But God’s Gospel is a living Word of a Risen Savior. Millions love Him today. It is appropriate that the final letter of Paul, 2 Timothy, is a challenge to preach the Word. Timothy, God’s servant, must preach the Gospel “correctly

handling the word of truth...with kindness and gentleness...in season and out of season with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Timothy 2.15,24,25, 4.2). While many in these “terrible last days” oppose God and His word by their lives and their lips, God’s servant is to “continue in what you have learned and become convinced of” (2 Timothy 3.14). Paul knew what it was to “be in need and have plenty” (Philippians 4.12). He writes with this contentment from his deathbed. His preaching ministry is over but Timothy’s was to continue on -- and the relay race of Gospel proclamation grows through the ages (2 Timothy 2.2). Today’s preacher would do well to carefully study this letter from the seasoned master.

The Church Exists to Share the Word of God

A church is not a building; in fact, many churches do not have buildings. A church is a group of believers committed to Jesus, to the Scriptures, and to one another. Churches do many good things for people. Many lonely people come to church to make friends, and this is right, because church people are often good people. A church can be a great place to meet your future spouse. There are many needs met by churches. Some churches offer programs for youth, families, and the elderly. Churches are often good places for music lovers; you can sing in a choir, and sometimes you can learn to play an instrument. Churches provide seminars on financial management, coping with loss, overcoming addictions, how to learn a foreign language, how to operate a computer, and many other topics. These are great ways to serve the community. My wife and I went to free exercise classes offered by a church in our neighborhood in Hawaii. All these good activities, and many others, are ways a church can show God’s love for the world. But non-church people can do all these things also, and sometimes they do a better job of them.

The unique thing a church has, which the world does not have, is the Word of our God. Indeed, the church exists for God – it lives because He does. It is His embassy in this world. Here lost people can come and find Him. All of our meetings, programs, and events should introduce people to Him. Unfortunately, sometimes our church events only entertain believers. The one thing a church does that non-church people cannot do is share the Word of God. The Apostle Paul makes this point in three verses of Scripture. He calls the church, “God’s household, the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Timothy 3.15). “His [God’s] intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known” (Ephesians 3.10). And to the Philippian believers he wrote, “You shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life” (Philippians 2.15,16). So the Church of Jesus is founded on the Word, grows by the Word, and must make the Word known.

Churches Grow by the Word of God

I love the stories of God’s Church. Many great examples of faith and ministry come from the history of the Christian church, on every continent, over the last two thousand years. Christian history reveals that strong preaching grows strong churches. As you study the history of the Christian church, you will find great preachers and the great effects of their preaching. The first Christian preacher was the last Old Testament prophet, John the Baptizer, of whom we read, “the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him” (Mark 1.5). Then came the preacher par excellence - Jesus the Messiah, the One of whom John testified, “Everyone is going to him” (John 3.26). Paul and the Apostles preached with such fervor that their enemies said, “These men have caused trouble all over

the world” (Acts 17.6). Paul could look at what God was doing through the early preachers and say, “All over the world this gospel is producing fruit and growing” (Colossians 1.6). Standing on the foundation of Jesus and the Apostles, preachers have proclaimed the eternal gospel through the centuries and across the continents. John Chrysostom, the “golden mouth,” preached to thousands in the Eastern Church during the fourth century. The great preachers of the Reformation - Luther, Calvin, Knox, Latimer, and Ridley - were used by God to topple tyrants and transform nations. Following them were Puritans and Revivalists like the Wesley’s, Whitefield, Edwards, Moody, and Spurgeon. In the last century God has used preachers like Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Luis Palau, John Stott, Festo Kivengere, Charles Swindoll, and Billy Graham to reach all nations with His Word. The story of Church advance reveals a story of faithful preaching.

There are many factors that lead to church growth, and the most important is the sovereign will of God. There are also many ways to define growing churches, strong churches, and strong believers. Not everyone’s definition of a “strong church” will be biblical. Buildings, meetings, numbers of people, financial growth, or even political influence impress many -- and I pray your church will have all these things, in abundance! But God’s measuring standard for the church is Holy Scripture. Do you preach it? Do you believe it? Do you live it? Do you give it away? Only the building materials that are eternally permanent will endure His judgment fire. Build with gold, silver, and precious stones that will remain forever (1 Corinthians 3.10-15). God’s Word will endure long after heaven and earth pass away (Matthew 24.35, Isaiah 40.8). Therefore, the best way a pastor can do his part to grow strong believers and churches - in quantity and especially quality - is to excel in preaching. So if the Church exists for God and His Word, and grows by His Word, then my fellow preacher, you must preach!

Why preach? I have three reasons: First, because preaching has always been God’s primary way of bringing people to faith in Jesus: “Faith comes by hearing” (Romans 10.17). Second, preaching is God’s prime way of building up His church (Acts 20.28,32). God wants new believers to grow into mature disciples. God wisely uses preaching as both a method of salvation and a means of sanctification. Third is a personal reason -- preaching is one of the greatest privileges a human being could ever have! Yes, it is hard work, but it is a great joy and privilege. I pray your soul will also be thrilled by the joy of this ministry. May Paul’s praise express our heart’s desire:

“Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him” (2 Corinthians 2.14).

2. Who Should Preach? - The Person God will Use

“The Jaw”

The Baganda tribe of Uganda has an interesting history. They are led by the Kabaka, their king. A visitor to Kampala, Uganda, today can see the Kisubi Tombs, an impressive grass-thatched palace that was once the home of the Kabakas. It also serves as their burial site. It is particularly interesting that only the jawbone of the Kabaka is buried at this sacred location in Kisubi. In the Baganda culture, the word of the Kabaka was all-powerful. Their mouth spoke life or death for the people. The site at Kisubi is a place of great power because it houses the jawbones of many former rulers. In fact the name Kabaka is literally translated “the jaw” or “the mouth” in the Luganda language.

This interesting tribal practice can compare to the power of the spoken Word that comes forth from the preacher. It too carries the power of life or death for all who hear. Yet, there is one significant difference. The word of the preacher is weak when his life is not consistent with his preaching. The preacher God will use is more than just “the jaw.”

The Man

Scripture has much to say about the qualifications of preachers, but very little about how they should actually preach. Our life is our loudest sermon. Paul tells Timothy and Titus what God expects of church leaders. (I realize that not only church leaders preach; but often the jobs of preaching and leading usually go together -- as they should.) God is concerned about our lifestyle, family relations, maturity, and reputation (1 Timothy 3.1-7). Within this text, Paul says that the leader should be “able to teach” (verse 2). That ability is very definitely connected to their character and conduct. These divine lifestyle requirements help to qualify the preacher (see also Titus 1.6-9). We must “walk the walk” before we “talk the talk.” Carefully notice Paul’s word order, “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Timothy 4.16). A good life is placed before good doctrine, and both are necessary to save ourselves and our hearers.

- **FAITH** - The good life is a life of faith. We are saved by faith in Jesus, because only He is perfectly good. In fact, apart from our faith in Him, we have no goodness. We live all our Christian life by continuing in faith, “rooted and built up in Him” (Colossians 2.6,7). We preach about a God we have never seen, a Jesus we have never met, and a heaven we have never visited – such preaching demands faith! Paul’s preaching ministry was based on faith. And his faith was seen by his hearers because of his “deep conviction” (1 Thessalonians 1.5). In the same way, Paul could see the evidence of faith in the life of Timothy, his apprentice in preaching. “I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which...now lives in you” (2 Timothy 1.5). People will never believe what we say when our life contradicts the message. If we are to preach that people must have faith, they must also see our faith in action.

One area that measures a preacher’s faith is money. Are you preaching about a mighty God who can do anything? Who owns everything? Who is loving and giving? Do you then grumble about being poor and lacking what you need? Well, what is wrong? Is God able? Do you believe? Where is your faith? Faith must be seen in our lives and heard in our preaching.

- **HEALTH** - The good life is a healthy life -- in body, soul, and mind. Paul worked to be in peak physical condition, to the best of his ability, "I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Corinthians 9.27). He also taught, "Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you" (1 Corinthians 6.19). Many things about our bodies are beyond our control. But we can control the amount we eat, sleep, and exercise. People cannot hear our message without looking at our bodies. Do we look like we are making an effort to care for the "temple of the Holy Spirit"?

Paul had a physical affliction hampering his life and ministry. He prayed three times for God's healing, but it was not His will. Instead, God gave him more grace to live with this affliction, as an evidence of His power (2 Corinthians 12.7-10). God heals today, when it is in His sovereign will to do so. But we cannot predict or manipulate God's healing power. Biblical healing is always spontaneous, never scheduled. Because of the effect of sin in our bodies, and our fallen world of sin, final physical healing will not happen until we receive our heavenly bodies (Psalm 103.3, 2 Corinthians 5.1,2).

Our soul must also be healthy. The Bible uses many words to describe our spiritual nature: "new man," "soul," "spirit" and "heart." We must seek spiritual health and strength through a life of prayer and Scripture reading. Praise, worship, singing to the Lord, should be our great delight. (It may not be a good idea to review sermon notes during the worship time before preaching. We will preach better when "our heart is full." And it is through our worship that we will speak from the fullness of our hearts.) We must make it a priority to keep our souls growing in the Lord. "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well" (3 John 2).

Our mind must also be healthy: "...be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12.2). A person with a healthy mind thinks pure thoughts. A Christian's mind is a battleground against impure thoughts. These come from immorality in the world and corruption within us. We must strive to "take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10.3-5). We battle against pride, sexual thoughts, revenge, and many other forms of evil. John Calvin said, "Our hearts are a factory for idols." But Calvin also knew that God redeems and renews us in Christ, as he prayed, "My heart I offer you, promptly and sincerely."

It is not easy to make divisions between body, soul, and mind. We are a single, whole person; and one part of our being influences another. But Scripture does, in various verses, address different aspects of our being. The emphasis of all these passages is that every part of us belongs to God. It is our privilege to bring Him glory in every thing we do. "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10.31).

There is no way to take care of our health, both physical and spiritual, without discipline. These ancient words of Job speak to one practical area, "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl" (Job 31.1). We must strive to establish a daily routine with time for growth of body, soul, and mind. I have tried and failed many different plans and programs for keeping a good daily schedule. But I keep trying, because I know that this life is a gift, and I want to make every moment count for Jesus. Paul gives three examples of the disciplined life in 2 Timothy 2: a soldier under authority, a patient farmer, and an athlete in

training. “Be very careful, then, how you live - not as unwise but as wise - making the most of every opportunity because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5.15,16).

- **FAMILY** - One important area of discipline is our family life. Paul asks the obvious question, “If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?” (1 Timothy 3.5). The work of ministry is very demanding. Some preachers are so busy with “God’s work” they neglect their own family. This is a big mistake. God’s most important work for the preacher is his family. They are the most important members of the church we serve. Your family is a living illustration of your sermons. How should a Christian husband and father behave? People will look at the preacher. How should a Christian wife and mother behave? People will look at the preacher’s wife. How should Christian children behave? People will look at their children. This is a very difficult standard for the preacher’s family to attain. Even though it seems unfair, this is the demand people will make.

Of course we cannot force our family to believe and obey the Lord, nor should we try. Instead, it is the husband and father’s duty to follow the example of Jesus as a loving leader (Ephesians 5.25-30). We are to be men who love deeply and pray diligently. If your family is not interested in following Jesus, your ministry will be difficult, but not impossible. Only God can control the situations of our life. Yet, we can control how we react to the challenges, and lead our family through them. As a ship sails through a storm, the Captain is at the mercy of the wind and the waves. His duty is to hold tightly onto the “wheel” and steer the ship to calm waters. May God enable us to pilot through the storms of this life, as we trust in Him.

- **MATURITY** - Scripture says a leader “must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment of the devil” (1 Timothy 3.6). The devil fell from a high place of authority in God’s spiritual world. He was once an obedient angel of God, but pride made him fall. It is dangerous for a leader to be lifted up into a prominent position, no matter how long they have been a believer. We are in a constant battle against pride. One expression of pride is to think we do not need time with God to grow; we are too busy serving! Then we try and serve in our “own” strength.

It is possible to preach an eloquent message about God but not really know Him. Some may speak from a past experience, or another’s experience, but not their own present experience. And if they succeed at this a couple times, they may continue in this bad practice. They may think, “It worked for me last time, it will work again.” This becomes a special temptation if ministry becomes our source of financial support. So before long a servant of God, who could have a great future in ministry, falls. Some will fall into a terrible sin. Others will just fall out of effective ministry. Some may continue in “church work” for many years. But they serve like Saul who remained king even after “the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him” (1 Samuel 16.14). Some preachers can “go through the motions” of their ministry with some success; but they will grow tired. We can only go so far in our own strength. Jesus, the true vine, told us branches, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15.5).

For those who are new believers, I urge you to keep growing in the Lord. You should look for opportunities to share your testimony. Indeed, you should share your testimony as often as you are able, and support it with the Scriptures you are learning. But make sure you

are ready before beginning a regular preaching ministry. Remember, “Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry” (Luke 3.23). Even the Son of God needed years of preparation. The Apostle Paul had three years of “seminary training” in Arabia (Galatians 1.17,18). Seek the advice of older preachers about how and when to begin your work. “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3.1).

For those who are church leaders, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands...” (1 Timothy 5.22a). I know what it is like to pastor a church and not have many helpers in the ministry. When a new believer comes along with joy and enthusiasm, it is very tempting to rush them into ministry. But notice the verse continues, “...and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure” (1 Timothy 5.22b). To put a new believer into leadership is to invite trouble, for them and for us. Remember it is God’s church, God’s salvation, and God’s Word; we must do the ministry God’s way.

The Attitude

Another important area where we need discipline is in our attitude toward our hearers. Having the proper attitude is a necessary part of being a person God will use to preach.

- **LOVE** - This should be the compelling reason we share God’s Word with others. Our love should be for God first of all. It is because we love Him that we want His Word to be preached, His name to be exalted, His will to be obeyed, His glory to shine, and His Kingdom to advance. We want to tell the world of His love, that many more will love Him too. “We love because He first loved us” (1 John 4.19). By His love we have been given the privilege of preaching His Word -- “through God’s mercy we have this ministry” (2 Corinthians 4.1). Paul describes his motive and attitude for preaching by saying, “For Christ’s love compels us” (2 Corinthians 5.14,15).

We must also love the people we speak to. If we get these loves in reverse order, we will not speak the truth to people. We will confuse love for false flattery. Love for God means sharing even the hard words of God so people will repent and receive His forgiving love. We must be “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4.15). Keeping love for God and man in proper order affects our ministry. Wanting to see people saved from hell-fire is of course a good thing, but it is not why we preach. Surely we do not want to see anyone perish -- but our love for God should be so much greater than our love for man. This means that we are more grieved about God being robbed of His glory than by the sinner perishing. Our love for God should give us a zeal for His glory and desire to preach His saving Word. Men will disappoint us; God never will. If love for men were our motive for preaching, we will find that sometimes we have trouble loving them. There are times we can be so hurt that we say in anger, “Let them go to hell!” But as we focus on God’s love for us, our thoughts quickly change, because we know that we have no claim on His love. We too are completely unworthy of His grace. And out of the overflow of His love, we continue loving others. A preacher without love is nothing (1 Corinthians 13.1,2).

- **COURAGE** - Courage is a necessary requirement for a faithful preacher, because the world does not love God. “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light” (John 3.19,20). Jesus came as the “light of the world” (John 8.12) and

the world killed Him. For centuries the world has tried to silence the message by killing the messenger. Only God knows whether you will be martyred for preaching, but I do promise you will suffer (2 Timothy 3.12). We know that God has designed our sufferings for our perfection (1 Peter 4.1). As our Sovereign Father, He works all things for the good of His children (Romans 8.28,29). Being “conformed to the likeness of his Son” (as Romans 8.29 states), involves death to self. It is difficult to stand alone. Jeremiah is known as the “weeping prophet” because of the agony, suffering, and rejection he endured as he preached in Judah. When he was tempted to quit preaching he felt, “His (God’s) word in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot” (Jeremiah 20.9). The preacher God will use does not choose to preach; he is chosen to preach, even when he wants to quit. “The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it” (1 Thessalonians 5.24).

Yet our courage must also be balanced with love. Biblical courage is not an excuse to be rude, reckless, or impolite. Even though a sinner is a rebel against the living God, they are still made in His image, with dignity and honor. Jesus, the Master Preacher washed the feet of his faithless disciples -- would you? A call to preach is not a license to insult. Jesus, the Lord of the Universe, chooses to knock at the door of the church like a gentleman, not to blow the walls down (Revelation 3.20). He is the perfect example of speaking the truth in love with courage. Many people hated his message, but they could not find fault with Him. He said to those Jews who opposed Him, “Because I tell you the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?” (John 8.45,46). No, they could not find sin in Him. But it is obvious; we are not sinless like Jesus. If we asked that question to our hearers they could list many of our sins! But when they look at us, do they see a stubborn sinner or repentant sinner? Are we honest about our struggles? Can they see that we are striving to grow in grace?

Jesus preached with bold words even when angry crowds were seeking His life. He was confident they could not take His life from Him, until He chose to lay it down and take it up again (John 10.17,18). We have the same promise of divine protection and presence in preaching (Matthew 10.32 - read the whole chapter!). Courage must be mixed with mercy and kindness; it is not a foolish recklessness but a holy boldness in the power and presence of God. The Word we preach carries great authority. We do not need to have an authoritative attitude to unleash its power. Even through our quiet, humble, tone -- God can speak powerfully.

- **HUMILITY** - The courageous, loving, preacher must also be humble. Paul said of his preaching ministry, “For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Corinthians 4.5). When your sermon is over, are people more impressed with you, or with God? Have you preached Jesus or yourself? It is very easy to be proud. We stand in front of the congregation demanding their attention. For thirty or so minutes only you are allowed to speak; everyone else should sit in silence. Then you expect the listeners to come and tell you what a good job you did, and what a wonderful person you are. There are many egomaniacs in the pulpit. But when you start believing such flattery, you will begin to lose your power to preach. “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (James 4.6). We should want to preach excellent sermons. And it is an encouragement to be appreciated by our listeners. But without Him we can do nothing -- certainly not preach (John 15.5).

An evidence of humility is willingness to work at becoming a better preacher. Because preaching is both a gift and a skill, it is possible to become more effective. The very fact that you're reading this book shows your interest in improving your skill. Are you open to the constructive suggestions of others? God's Word is perfect, but our sermons are not. Being open and teachable, like a child, is a requirement for entering the kingdom, even for preachers (Matthew 18.3). One preacher stood by the church door after his message. As one lady left she shook his hand and thanked him for the message. He said, "Do not thank me, thank God." She responded, "It was not THAT good!"

- **CONFIDENCE** - A final important attitude for being a person God will use in preaching is confidence. It may seem out of place to speak of confidence after humility. Because if we are honest, we admit we are so proud that God should resist us. I know I am. From this we can feel an inability to preach because of our great weaknesses. We preachers are a strange mix of feelings and emotions! Even Paul felt these doubts about himself: "And who is equal to such a task?" (2 Corinthians 2.16). But he did not doubt God and His Word. Biblical confidence is in the Lord, not in us. This means we should preach out of God's strength and our weakness.

The honest preacher sees his listeners as fellow strugglers in the fight against sin. He realizes the only thing standing tall in the meeting hall is the Word of God on the pulpit. It is only by grace that he is given the privilege to stand behind that pulpit and preach. So our message is about being made whole through being broken and finding victory in defeat. The greater sinner who preaches has a word of hope for the lesser sinners who listen (1 Timothy 1.12-17). This is because the more Truth we know the more we sin against it, and we preachers probably know more Scripture than our listeners. You may wonder why I am making such a strong point about our sin. It is because this is the solid basis of our confidence. We are living proof that God is alive, that He does have mercy to save, that He does transform sinners to saints, and that He will someday remove all sin from us. It is no accident that Paul, the Apostle most aware of his sin, was the one who made the greatest contribution to the Church (1 Corinthians 15.8-10). The one who is forgiven more will always love more (Luke 7.36-50). So the painful process of repentance and restoration, which we should go through on a regular basis, will make us more confident preachers. We know the Gospel saves sinners -- look at us!

A young African man wanted to make some money selling the mangos from the tree in his yard. So he took a sack of the fruit to the busy taxi park in the city, where people board vehicles to various destinations. He stood among the crowds in the hot sun and shouted, "Mangos, Mangos, Mangos!" with all of his strength. He shouted until he was hoarse. Sadly, no one paid him any attention. Then he thought he would soothe his sore throat with a ripe, juicy mango. He enjoyed the fruit so much he forgot about anything else. His whole face was covered with the sweet juice that soon ran down his arms to his elbows. His delight was contagious. Soon people lined up to buy a delicious mango. Shouting did not get their attention, the fruit did. Your life really is your loudest sermon.

The Woman

As you read this, especially if you are a woman, you may wonder, "May women preach?" I would prefer to keep silent on this question, because I do not love controversy. Yet, I believe women have a great contribution to make in the Church so we need to see what

Scripture has to say on this issue. Because of the confusion surrounding this question, it will be helpful to begin with some foundational observations.

- **INTERDEPENDENCE** - Men and women are interdependent; they cannot be independent of one another (1 Corinthians 11.11-12). It is biologically obvious that men and women need one another to exist. Scientists today are trying to create “artificial life” which does not “need” a man or woman for reproduction. Yet they cannot create life; the best they can do is borrow the sperm or egg from a male or female donor. It was God’s plan that there is a mutual interdependence between man and woman. Even in our creation the “image of God” is seen in “male and female” (Genesis 1.27) -- not just in one or the other, in both together.
- **EQUALITY** - Men and women are equal before God. Contrary to religions like Islam that hold women in a secondary role, Scripture says, “There is neither...male nor female...for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3.28). According to this passage in Galatians 3, men and women are equally justified by faith (v. 24), equally free from the bondage of legalism (v. 25), equally children of God (v. 26), equally clothed with Christ (v. 27), equally possessed by Christ (v. 29), and equally heirs of the promises of God to Abraham (v. 29). Peter calls the wife a “joint-heir of the gracious gift of life” (1 Peter 3.7). Jesus and His Apostles were great liberators of women, treating them with dignity and respect (Luke 8.1-3, Ephesians 5.25-29, 1 Timothy 5.2,3, 1 Peter 3.7). The history of the Christian movement has meant liberation and opportunity for women all around the world, as the gospel transforms cultural prejudices against women. Sadly, some women in Western countries have now gone beyond the freedom of Jesus, becoming again enslaved to current social ideologies.
- **GIFTEDNESS** - Both men and women are gifted for ministry. Scripture records the obedience of Sarah, the exploits of Deborah the Judge, the faith of Ruth, and the bravery of Esther. The first preachers of the resurrection were the women who ran from the empty tomb (Luke 24.24). The four daughters of Philip were prophetesses (Acts 21.9). Paul wrote, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church” (Romans 16.1). These Biblical examples confirm what we see in the church today; women display marvelous gifts and abilities in ministry. It challenges my pride as a man, but I must admit some women are far better preachers than men!
- **DIFFERENCES** - Men and women are different -- wonderfully different! When Adam first saw Eve he was thrilled (Genesis 2.23). And through the centuries men and women have known the pleasures of each other’s uniqueness, in temperament, personality, insight, and sexuality. In Western cultures there is a “unisex” movement that says women and men are the same. This is based on a denial of creation and Scripture. Women are created to birth and nurture, men are created to provide and defend. Paul refers to this difference of roles in the creation, “For Adam was formed first then Eve” (1 Timothy 2.13). Part of this created difference is in the area of leadership in the home and church. Man is invested with the authority and responsibility of headship “the head of the woman is man” (1 Corinthians 11.3).

My understanding of these complementary truths of Scripture is that it is proper for women to preach to both men and women, but they must do so under the leadership and

authority of a man. The “headship” principle means that women must exercise their ministry under the authority of a male senior pastor, and her husband if she is married. Under the leadership of a man, as part of a male-led ministry team, I believe women with gifts for preaching are to do so. In fact it would be sin for them to “bury” their God-given talents.

There are biblical examples that show women teaching men with the blessing of God. Paul makes specific reference to women prophesying in church (1 Corinthians 11.5), but they must do so under the authority of a male leader. From the same context we learn that men “learn” by such prophesying (1 Corinthians 14.31). Paul also has praise for Euodia and Syntyche, women who he said “contended at my side in the cause of the gospel” and are “fellow workers” (Philippians 4.2,3). The context is an appeal for the church in Philippi to help solve a quarrel between these women so that their ministry, and that of the entire church, could move forward in peace. It does not explicitly say that these women used speaking gifts in their ministry, but it is clear that they were active in “gospel” advancement. The godly woman “speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue” (Proverbs 31.26). Within this same context she is a blessing to her husband, this means the godly woman taught her husband to some extent. Paul’s “son in the Lord” Timothy was nurtured in the faith from infancy by the “preaching” - by life and lip - of his mother and grandmother, Eunice and Lois (2 Timothy 1.5). Of course we would all agree that women should naturally “preach” to young men and boys. But notice that their “preaching” ministry was to “continue” into Timothy’s adult life (2 Timothy 3.14). Paul tells Timothy to keep learning from his mentors, who surely included his mother, grandmother, and Paul himself. Women are among the church members who are told to “teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” (Colossians 3.16). The preaching ability of Apollos was improved by the superior Biblical understanding of Priscilla (Acts 18.24-28). (It is interesting that Luke defies social custom by listing the name of the wife [Priscilla] before her husband [Aquila] -- possibly because she was the better teacher.) Their instruction as wife and husband -- a wife apparently under the authority of her husband -- caused the great preacher Apollos to be even more effective. Teaching and learning are such broad terms that it is impossible that women not teach men, and men not learn from women, in many ways.

1 Corinthians 14 is a snap-shot of a church worship service. “When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up” (1 Corinthians 14.26). Different people take part in the service. There should be no interruption. There should be unity. There should be no speaking out of turn. There should be an order to all of this. He says in verse 29: “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said... the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission...” (1 Corinthians 14.29,34).

This specific instruction is for when prophecies, some of which are spoken by women, are shared. At that time, it is the elders of the church who will give the pronouncement as to their faithfulness. Women are silent on that evaluation. Therefore, then and now, the preaching, applying, and explaining of the Word to the gathered congregation for our normal meeting is the job of men. It was the job of men in the church in Corinth and it is the job of men in the church today. That is why Paul says: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent” (1 Timothy 2.12).

Teaching and having authority are two different activities. There are overlaps, especially in the preaching of the Word in the main worship gathering of a church. Hearers must do something - it is the Word of God - all of us must ultimately obey. So women prophesy, pray, exhort, sing, lead small group, teach classes, all under the authority of the elders and their husbands if they are married. But when the gathered church is listening to the applied Word of God, is the job of men. It is the time in which God's Word is explained, applied, and impressed upon the congregation in an ongoing, intentional, authoritative, instruction of God's Word to God's people. Men are elders, 1 Timothy 3, and the elders supervise the preaching. So women should not serve as bishops, as pastors, as elders, or even as preachers in Sunday services.

Although I believe women have the right to speak to men in some settings, in most cases it is best for them to exercise their gifts among women. In most cultures women have to fight many cultural prejudices to be accepted in ministry. Some are called to pioneer in using their gifts among men, and should do so. Many others should take full advantage of opportunities that are clearly open. Paul gives special instruction for women to teach women (Titus 2.3,4). Some women may see this as a limitation on their ministry. I do not. I see this as strategic advice for women to make their ministry most effective. Women everywhere, perhaps by temperament or creation, are more sensitive and open to spiritual things. And women also are the greatest influence on the home, and thus, ultimately, the society. If women took full advantage of their opportunity to shape the character of their children, their husbands, and their fellow women, we would see a much greater impact of the gospel in the world. Paul's words to Titus tell women how to do this. In their God-given role, women are most effective for the salvation of the world. It is only in Jesus that they are set free, to their greatest ability, for service.

The Team

I received Jesus as a high school student in Southern California in 1972. I was blessed to become part of an active church youth group. One unique aspect of our group was our involvement in ministry to our peers, particularly a weekly meeting for music and preaching we called the "One Way Inn Christian Coffee House." It was held at the home of our pastor, the Rev. Charles N. Svendsen, whose love for the gospel and us changed our lives forever. Sometimes 100 young people would gather for this ministry in their "furnished" car garage. Under my pastor's guidance, and through the encouragement of my peers in this ministry, I learned preaching. There are about 10 of us preaching today whose calling was birthed in that old garage.

Being together with a group of others in ministry was invaluable for sharpening our preaching ability. The way we challenged and encouraged one another was tremendous. Even today I wish I could have these friends critique my preaching, because it was ruthlessly honest, intensely practical, and deeply loving. We were "pilgrims" who grew in the Lord daily. We loved Jesus, and one another in Him. And we wanted to help one another serve Him even better. At the time we knew we did not know we were doing so many things right. We were just a group of kids not afraid of taking risks, who saw God at work in our lives. He graciously used us, despite the fact that we were young and naïve.

I am sorry to say that I find most young pastors – and even old ones -- far too proud to be held accountable in their preaching. Many boast that they have graduated from seminary,

or have been preaching for so many years; now nobody can tell them anything. Such an unteachable attitude prevents them from improving their skills.

Obviously, preaching is a public act. A man stands before a group and commands their attention to his message. Every listener forms his opinion of that message. It is arrogant to imagine none of the listeners can improve the message, to clarify the interpretation, to sharpen the logic, or to improve the presentation. Our traditions have reinforced the notion that it is the task of the preacher to talk, and the duty of the church to listen. We think church members should keep their opinions to themselves. Yet, many who listen attentively will leave the meeting and make some comment about the message. Unfortunately, the preacher never hears most of these helpful insights.

My experience with my young colleagues was quite different. None of us had been formally trained. We had no degrees, no professional positions, we received no salaries; we were just kids who loved Jesus and one another. So we spoke freely to one another. “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27.17). I wonder whether any of us are so free and teachable today?

I suggest you surround yourself with some good critics, who love you, but who love God more. It is likely that you are already in ministry partnership with others, church leaders, musicians, and members. Your wife makes a great critic although you may not want to hear what she says! One of the best ways to help yourself and improve your ministry is to teach these partners how to be good critics. What should a good sermon sound like? What is the best time for you to receive their review? For example, some preachers are too tired to be criticized on Sundays. They need a few days rest to be ready to listen. Others want to hear the critique right after the closing prayer because they know that the reviewers will include positive words they need for emotional affirmation. Every preacher is made differently. (I have supplied a specific form for sermon evaluation that can help you to teach your critics in the back of this book. Adapt it any way you like for your own situation.)

Who are the people God will use for preaching? According to the Scriptures we have seen, they are men and women who are growing in their walk with Him. They are people who discipline their thoughts, words, and actions to be more like Jesus. They are people who realize that they cannot do the ministry alone. They know they need God’s presence and power; they also need brothers and sisters with whom they share the responsibility of preaching. It is an amazing privilege that God uses us to preach His Word.

3. What Do I Preach? -- Understanding the Bible

This may seem like a strange question; of course, we preach the Scriptures! But the Bible is a big and complex book. We need to spend time trying to understand it. We need to give extra-special care and attention to understanding a book written by God! Thankfully, He gives us His Spirit as our teacher (1 John 2.20). The Spirit shows us that the Bible is a letter from Jesus to us.

A Word from God

There have been times in my preaching ministry when I have doubted. Any believer, being part sinner and part saint, has some doubts and questions about God and His Word. I am thankful that my doubts have been small and passing, but when they occur it distracts my focus on Him, and limits my effectiveness for Him. It is especially necessary for the preacher to deal with doubts, to seek answers to questions, and then move forward in ministry with confidence. It is vital for us to know that we can preach with confidence because the Word of God is true.

The Bible is a book revealed by God. Our God has taken the initiative to reveal Himself to us; He is a "self-revealing" God. This revelation is through the gift of His Spirit: "no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 2.11). The word "revelation" means, "to show, uncover, and make clear." God Himself takes the initiative in showing Himself to us. If He did not, how else could we know Him?

I once hiked into the magnificent Tien Shan Mountains of Kazakhstan. Along the trail I met a Russian man in his seventies who walked past me with strength and vigor. I was shamed by his superior condition! When I caught up with him again, he told me he hikes that trail every week, and has done so for many years. He said he makes the trek because those awesome mountains are his god, and this hike was his worship. On that beautiful day I could almost understand how he could think that way, indeed the creation does declare the glory of our Creator. But we do not need to hike to remote peaks trying to commune with a faraway god. He has revealed Himself clearly and completely.

My hiker friend found a general revelation from God in creation. His mistake was to worship the creation instead of the Creator. I am sorry he would not see that the skies are preaching sermons and the stars are sounding praises to our Creator King (Psalm 19.1, Acts 14.17). Or to be more biblically correct, I am sorry he foolishly "exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator, who is forever praised" (Romans 1.25). The beautiful Tien Shan Mountains will stand against him on Judgment Day. God's general revelation is enough evidence of Him to condemn a sinner who refuses to honor the Creator.

There is another form of general revelation God has given to all men -- our conscience. "He has set eternity in the hearts of men..." (Ecclesiastes 3.11). Paul teaches that even those without the Scriptures "show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing" (Romans 2.15). Man knows that the unseen God is looking at Him. This is why he chooses to sin in the darkness, yet the darkness is as daytime in God's eyes. There is no escape from the sense that there is

something wrong in our souls, some guilt from which we cannot flee. God has not put this conviction in our hearts to torment us, but to make us seek Him for redemption and peace.

This general revelation is a great encouragement to the preacher, because we are not speaking to people about an "unknown God." We can say, as did Paul in Athens, "Now what you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you" (Acts 17.23). We share our message with people who have the fingerprints of God all over them. They have the proof of His presence as they feel the wind against their face or watch a child grow. Even the hardened cynic must believe that life is too wonderful to occur by chance. The Holy Spirit can use the Scripture to awaken this awareness of God and stir their conscience to life. As He did at the creation, the Spirit moves across the deep of the human soul and bring a new creation in Jesus.

All people have received God's general revelation through their conscience and His creation. Also, some people have been chosen by God to receive special revelation. This is a far greater encouragement to the preacher, because our God speaks and His Words are recorded in Scripture. It is our privilege to preach these very Words of God that people may "hear His voice and follow Him" (John 10.27). The Bible itself extols the wonder of this special revelation. Indeed, the law of the Lord is "more precious than gold, than much pure gold," and His ordinances "are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb" (Psalm 19.7-10). Because the living God has breathed out every Word of Scripture, it is useful for all of life (2 Timothy 3.16,17). What a great encouragement to preach God's Word to man! As God formed man from the dust of earth and breathed the breath of life into him, so also He breathed His Word into the inspired Scriptures. Truly, the Bible was made for man. God our Maker gives us "ears to hear" His living Word (Revelation 3.22).

The most special revelation of all is Jesus, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Colossians 2.9). The Scripture is the key to understanding Jesus, and He is the key to understanding Scripture. Peter told Jesus, "You have the words of eternal life" (John 6.68). Jesus said, "These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5.39). So the preacher brings people to God's Book that they might see God's Son. Jesus instructed Philip, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14.9). The preacher should have great confidence, because our God is "self-revealing." As Christians, we follow Jesus, who is revealed in Scripture. We cannot know God without knowing Jesus, and we cannot know Jesus without the Bible. "No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made Him known" (John 1.18). This is what makes the work of preaching so important.

A Word Kept by God

Perhaps you may still feel some lack of confidence in ministry because the Bible is a very old book. How can we be sure that the Scriptures we have are not corrupted, as the Muslims often claim? The story of God keeping the Scriptures is wonderful. Our Bible is a great testimony of the power of God. We no longer have the actual documents written long ago by Moses, Paul, John, or any of the biblical authors; they have been lost over time. What we have are copies -- indeed, copies of copies. Yet, it is amazing how many copies we do have, thousands more than any other ancient document, found from Spain to India and many places in between, and in many languages. What is even more amazing is the accuracy of these manuscripts. The story of Western civilization is filled with priests, scribes, rabbis, and

teachers who spent their lives making accurate copies of Holy Scripture, passing it on from one generation to the next. Through their loving labors, God has worked to keep an accurate record of His Word. He would not go through the great sacrifice of giving His Son for our salvation only to allow the book declaring that love to be lost or corrupted.

God is continuing to make His Word known today. He equips Bible translators so that all the peoples of the earth can hear the voice of God in their own language (Acts 2.8). We do not believe that God speaks only Arabic, or any one language; our God is bigger than that! He is the Lord of all nations and desires that none should perish. There is a great work being done in our day to translate the Scriptures into all languages. It is a difficult and complex process. It requires an accurate knowledge of the original biblical languages -- Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek -- and the particular local language. But God, who speaks all languages, is gifting men and women for this vital task. And as their work succeeds, it proves again and again the reliability and accuracy of God's Word. What a privilege to take these Scriptures and preach them to eager ears so that God's "ways may be known on earth, His salvation among all nations" (Psalm 67.2). Without a doubt, we can trust the Bible.

Principles of Biblical Interpretation: Simplicity

It is one thing to acknowledge the accuracy and authority of Scripture, and quite another to understand it. When the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness he quoted the Scripture accurately. His mistake was to apply it incorrectly, thus his interpretation was wrong. If we do not apply Scripture correctly in our sermons, we make the same mistake. John Stott suggests four helpful "principles" for us to keep in mind as we seek to understand the Bible. The principle of simplicity teaches that God has spoken His Word to be understood. Scripture is not meant to be confusing and difficult; it is clear and direct. This is in keeping with God's very nature: "God is light" (1 John 1.5). His will is to bring clarity and truth to those who read the Word. So we should look for the plain, natural, meaning of Scripture.

The simple meaning of Scripture is not always "literal." Scripture has some strange sayings. For example, "God pitched a tent in the sun," "trees will clap their hands," "the Lord's eye is on him," and "eat my flesh and drink my blood." Are these literally true? I do not think so. Instead, I believe they mean what they were intended to mean. The Bible is not illogical. Trees' clapping their hands is poetic. God is Spirit; He does not have eyeballs. Christians are not called to cannibalize Jesus. These are figurative truths, poems, and colorful expressions of God's Word. So when you find poetry -- and great amounts of Scripture are poetic -- interpret it as you would any poem, by looking for the main truths. We can think of a more "literal" interpretation for these phrases. For example: "God pitched a tent in the sun": God is the great Lord of the Universe, far above His Creation. "Trees will clap their hands": the entire created world brings glory and praise to God. "The Lord's eye is on him": God knows all the details of our lives. And "eat my flesh and drink my blood": we should be as close as possible to Jesus. These more "literal" definitions of mine may be more precise, but they lack the rich beauty of biblical poetry. We must understand the type of literature used in the Scripture and interpret it properly.

We must also realize much in Scripture is beyond our full understanding -- but it is not contrary to our understanding. Scripture may be "trans-logical," but it is not "illogical." Something "trans-logical" is logical as far as we can understand it, but it goes beyond our ability to fully understand it. For example, Scripture teaches that God is one, yet He exists as

three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The complexities of the Trinity will not be understood by our minds even in eternity. Yet, the statement, "We have one God in three persons" is logical. Even in the natural world we realize that water can exist as ice, steam, and liquid. Although this illustration about water is not adequate to explain God, it does show us that three-in-one is a logical possibility. The Trinity is "trans-logical" -- it goes beyond our logical ability. Our minds can understand something of this truth, but cannot go very far into its complexity. Complete knowledge of God is far beyond our reasoning abilities.

Probably the most common violation of this principle of simplicity is the wrong use of allegory. There are right and wrong uses of allegory in biblical interpretation. We use allegory when we tell a story to explain something unrelated to that story. Jesus used allegory as he told stories and parables to explain the meaning of the Kingdom of God. Not long ago I heard a pastor in Kazakhstan preach a sermon from Exodus 15.22-26. In this text the Israelites have passed through the Red Sea and entered the desert. Concern arose when they could not find water. They finally find a spring, but it is too bitter to drink. So the people grumble against Moses. The Lord then guides him to throw a piece of wood into this bitter pool and its water is turned sweet. "What was this special wood which held the power to turn the bitter into sweet?" asked the pastor. He triumphantly answered his own question, "Jesus!"

On another occasion I heard a sermon from Joshua 2. In this passage Israelite spies have entered the city of Jericho and found refuge in the home of Rahab. When she learns that the army of Israel will soon destroy her city, Rahab pleads for deliverance. The men promise to spare her family if they gather in her house during the invasion. Their safety was insured because Rahab hung a scarlet cord from her window (v. 18). "What was this scarlet cord which held the power of salvation?" The preacher declared, "The blood of Jesus!"

Another preacher attempted to open the mysteries of the first chapter of Genesis. In that text we hear the voice of God declare the creation of man. Man, unlike any other creature, is made in God's image; "Let us make man in our image" (1.26). Notice the plural voice used here, "let us" and "our image." "Who is Moses talking about with these plural references to the Creator?" The preacher unfolded the secret, "The Holy Trinity – Father, Son, and Spirit."

All three sermons use allegory in a wrong way. We have all heard, and perhaps even used, this wrong method before. Each preacher took an idea from Scripture (true and wonderful ideas), and wrongly attached them to other Scripture passages. They took an idea from one context and wrongly apply it to another context. The wrong use of allegory -

- ***Sounds Deeply Spiritual*** – "Isn't that our purpose in Bible reading, to find Jesus?" a sincere person may ask. Each of the three examples declares wonderful truths about our God; His triune character, His saving blood, and His transforming grace. How could anyone find fault with an interpretation which is so "God honoring"?
- ***Impresses our Listeners*** – When the preacher brings these deep spiritual truths out of passages where one would not expect to find them, many listeners are impressed. "Wow! I thought it was just a piece of wood Moses threw into the pond; I never realized it was Jesus. My pastor has such deep insight into the Bible," gushes one loyal listener.

- ***Ignores the Original Meaning*** – The big problem with wrong use of allegory is we are not being honest with the Biblical message. Moses never imagined he was throwing Jesus into the water; it was a piece of ordinary wood. The doctrine of the Trinity is clearly revealed only in the New Testament, not on the first page of the Bible. Remember Moses wrote Genesis for Israelites who had just left polytheistic Egypt, and were on their way to polytheistic Canaan. The creed of Israel was, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is ONE” (Deuteronomy 6.4). A thousand years later they killed Jesus for daring to include Himself in that oneness (John 10.30-33). It was only after our Lord’s ascension that His Apostles began to understand something about the Trinity. Yes, the blood of Jesus saves us today. But Rahab’s window cord was not soaked in that blood. To put Jesus in her window is to deny the whole order of redemptive history. Jesus came long after Joshua. It is the context which determines the true meaning of a passage. Such wrong allegory is “eisegesis,” forcing an outside meaning *into* passages. Our calling is exegesis, to take the meaning *out of* each passage that is written.
- ***Anything is Possible*** – What if Joseph Stalin (who was once a seminary student) was preaching from the Rahab story? Perhaps he would have told us that that red cord hanging in Rahab’s window symbolized a wonderful salvation. This salvation was also symbolized in red, the red banners of communism. Why not? There is no reason why we could not say the red stands for communism, the blood of Jesus, Coca-Cola, or even tomato juice. Any idea can be used to fulfill our allegorical method - it is all our opinion.
- ***The Bible is Unnecessary*** – Wrong allegory is a matter of attaching our precious biblical truths to a text. There is no reason that text must be the Bible. Perhaps we could use a history book. We could teach that Adolph Hitler was really “Satan” and the Allied “Armies of God” defeated him. Perhaps we might use the newspaper. Anything good can “really” be a picture of God – His Son, His Spirit, or His Church. Anything bad can be a manifestation of the Evil One. Even music and films can hold a wealth of spiritual truths for our preaching. We are no longer limited to ancient Scripture! Forgive my sarcasm, but I am trying to show the foolishness of this wrong use of allegory.

During the middle Ages the Roman Catholic Church practiced this wrong allegory. They made Scripture say whatever they wanted. The Protestant Reformers wisely led the Church back to this principle of simplicity. The French reformer John Calvin (1509-1564) said, "Let us know then, that the true meaning of Scripture is the natural and obvious meaning; and let us embrace and abide by it resolutely. Let us not only neglect as doubtful, but boldly set aside as deadly corruptions, the pretended expositions which lead us away from the natural meaning."

Charles Simeon (1759-1836), an Anglican preacher, embraced this principle "My endeavor is to bring out of Scripture what is there, and not to thrust in what I think might be there. I have a great jealousy on this point, never to speak more or less than I believe the mind of the Spirit, in the passage I am expounding."

There is a right use of allegory in biblical interpretation. What makes it “right” is when the Bible itself explains the meaning. The prophet Nathan humbled King David with a story about a greedy rich man who stole a poor man’s only lamb. Nathan shocked David with

the words, "You are the man!" David had Uriah slain and stole his beautiful wife. The Bible, within the same context, makes a clear connection between Nathan's story and David's sin. This is proper allegory (2 Samuel 12). The prophet Ezekiel tells the story of two adulterous sisters, Oholah and Oholibah. He explains that the sisters' real identity is Samaria and Jerusalem (Ezekiel 23.4). The parables of Jesus are allegories of spiritual truths (Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43). Paul told the Galatians an allegory to explain the relation between law and grace (4.21-26). The Bible itself explains the meaning of these allegories. If an interpretation sounds illogical or strangely philosophical, it is probably not correct. Remember the principle of simplicity.

Principles of Biblical Interpretation: History

The Bible was revealed to different people at different times. It did not fall out of heaven as a completed book. Inside Scripture are sixty-six books, written by about forty human authors over a one-thousand-year span of time. The last book was finished almost two thousand years ago. In order to understand the meaning of a passage, we must know what it meant to those who first received it. Why did Moses tell the Israelites how to distinguish between clean and unclean animals? It was because they needed to know what God wanted them to eat on their journeys in a new land. Most of the "unclean" things are not as safe to eat, especially in a hot climate. Why did Jesus talk to Nicodemus about a new birth? It was because as a respected religious leader, Nicodemus was trusting in his works for salvation. Why did Paul teach the Corinthians about sexual purity? It was because their city was filled with prostitutes and immorality. Why did Peter speak of the sufferings of Jesus? It was because the believers he wrote to were suffering for Him and needed to remember that suffering for Christ leads to glory. In all these texts we have God's Word in the thoughts, words, and ideas of human authors: "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1.21). So we must place ourselves in the situation of those who first read the words of Scripture to learn its historical meaning.

Suppose someone wants to give a lecture about Kazakhstan. He must first make clear what time period he is speaking about. The present Republic of Kazakhstan became independent in 1991. The land of the Kazakhs has gone through many changes. Centuries ago, the steppes of Central Asia were inhabited by nomadic peoples. Battles and power struggles changed the political structure of the land many times. In the 1800's, the Czars of Russia took control of the land. For much of the 1900's, the land was part of the U.S.S.R. Today it is a developing republic. So any lecturer on Kazakhstan would be foolish not to make clear what time period he is speaking about. If he is talking about politics, development, agriculture, or religion, he must be time and culture specific. Biblical history is even more complex. The two thousand years from Abraham to Jesus were times of great change for the people of God and the lands in which they lived. It would not be accurate to simply open the Bible and think that it can be applied directly to our situation today. The stage must be set, and the principles of Scripture properly applied.

I once attended a church meeting in Almaty where the preacher spoke from Revelation 3.15-22. That was his first mistake. He should have begun with verse 14, which introduces the letter, saying, "To the angel of the church in Laodicea." This verse makes us wonder, "Where is this place? Who were these people? What was their life like?" Instead, the preacher focused only on our need to be "hot" or "cold" for Jesus, according to verse 15. He had some clever stories, but he never explained the meaning of the text. History records that

Laodicea was a Roman city located near the hot water springs of Hierapolis. Roman engineers built an aqueduct so the city would be supplied with hot running water, but by the time the water finally reached the city, it was neither hot nor cold. This expensive, complex, engineering project delivered lukewarm water! The Risen Jesus reminds the Laodiceans of this embarrassment. Our best efforts fall short of God's perfection.

Applying this principle of history helps us to answer a controversy about John 3. Many have debated the meaning of "born of water" (v. 5). Some teach that in this passage Jesus is saying baptism is mandatory for salvation. That is, they equate the phrase "born of water" with Christian baptism. But the principle of history proves this interpretation incorrect. Christian baptism was not introduced when Jesus conversed with Nicodemus. The first Christian baptism began after Jesus ascended and sent His Spirit to the Church on Pentecost. So it is historically impossible that Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about Christian baptism, it did not exist. "Born of water" is a reference to natural birth, as the mother's "water" discharges just prior to delivery. The context supports this idea as Nicodemus has just asked about natural birth (v. 4). So in John 3.5 Jesus explains we will only enter the kingdom through a second birth. The first is our natural birth by our mothers; the second is by God's Spirit.

As we apply the principle of history we realize Jesus was not directly referring to the Lord's Supper when he said, "Eat my flesh and drink my blood" (John 6.53). As Jesus spoke these words the sacrament had not yet been introduced. In John 6, Jesus was looking back to God's sending manna during the time of Moses (vs. 32 and 49). He is disappointed that those who had just eaten the bread he miraculously provided (vs. 10-13) misunderstood the spiritual meaning of the food - God alone saves and satisfies. The Jews in the wilderness sought to satisfy themselves on the manna. But "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 8.3). Jesus is that Word. He alone saves and satisfies. The crowds needed to believe in Jesus - to feast upon Him by faith (vs. 26-29, 51-58). At this point in history, they knew nothing about Holy Communion. Jesus' meaning becomes clear as we compare His words in verse 47 "he who believes has everlasting life," and verse 54 "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life." Commenting on this chapter Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (354-430) said, "Believe and you have eaten."

During a preaching class one sister testified how in her walk with God He always gives her Scripture relevant to her needs. Once she found herself facing a fine for failing to obtain necessary government documents and pay her taxes. At this time she found "God's promise to her" in Ezra 7.24: "You are also to know that you have no authority to impose taxes, tribute or duty on any of the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, temple servants or other workers at this house of God." She thought this was a perfect message to share with the judge due to examine her case. How could anyone dare tax a worker in God's house like her? Emboldened by this promise, she went to court and told the judge that God told her not to pay her taxes. It worked! The judge overlooked her violations. As she concluded her message to us, several shouted their "Hallelujah." It seemed God had really given her His message through Ezra. How could we deny the "proof"- she was among us pardoned and free! As her teacher I too praised God; I blessed His mercy that kept her out of prison! But I found less to praise in her biblical interpretation.

Her "promise" was first spoken by a Persian king named Artaxerxes about 450 B.C. (7.11). It was written in an official letter carried by Ezra when he led a group of exiles to their

homeland of Israel (7.9). They found favor from the king who respected their purpose (7.6). Ezra proclaimed, "Praise be to the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put it into the king's heart to bring honor to the house of the LORD in Jerusalem in this way and who has extended his good favor to me before the king and his advisers and all the king's powerful officials. Because the hand of the LORD my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me" (7.27,28). We can echo this praise today because the God of Ezra is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He leads us with grace and protection in His service. He opens doors of favor and blessing - supplying our every need through Christ.

But faith in God does not grant full immunity from government regulations. Even Jesus paid taxes after Peter fished the coins (Matthew 17.27). The New Testament Apostles speak more directly to the Church today about taxation. Paul said, "It is necessary to submit to the authorities...This is also why you pay taxes...If you owe taxes, pay taxes" (Romans 13.5-7 see also 1 Peter 2.13-17).

Favorable circumstances do not prove the correctness of our biblical interpretation. Accurate interpretation of a passage comes through a right understanding of its context and proper application of its message. So we must take care to understand what the Scripture meant to those who first received it. Without respecting this principle of history, we cannot understand the Bible today. The Bible cannot mean something to us today that it could not have meant to those who first received its message.

Principles of Biblical Interpretation: Harmony

The Bible itself is a miracle; forty human authors writing over a one-thousand-year span of time produced one harmonious book. You have probably met an enemy of the Gospel who claims that the Bible contradicts itself. I have found the best way to silence this attack is to hand that person a Bible and ask them to show some of these contradictions. Sometimes these critics have not even read the Bible! Others have shared passages that appear to contradict each other. In such times we should be ready to carefully study and explain our faith to honest seekers. We must do our best to show them that there are no contradictions in Scripture. The Bible's consistency is proof that there is one Divine Author, who never contradicts Himself.

We would appreciate the Bible's harmony even more if we gathered ten people, from the same culture and belief system, and asked them to write separate essays on God, man, judgment, and eternity. We would no doubt find a wide divergence, and many glaring contradictions, in the essays of these ten. Consider that Scripture has four times more authors, living across more than a thousand year span of time and cultures - and the writings of these forty different men speak with one amazingly consistent voice throughout.

Scripture does include some diversity, but never any contradictions. There are four different evangelists who tell the story of Jesus: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each of them wrote according to their own research, personality, and abilities (Luke 1.1-4). There are some differences in each of the four accounts. The time order of some of the stories and sermons of Jesus is not the same. There is a unique thematic arrangement of the life of Jesus by each of the evangelists. There are also different details emphasized in each gospel. For example, one gospel account of the Resurrection describes "one angel" at the empty tomb of Jesus; another speaks of "a young man," another of "two angels." Though none of the

Gospels say there was ONLY one angel. Some defenders of the faith have written "Harmonies of the Gospels" trying to show how it all fits together. Perhaps faith in God is not having everything fit together. Though some of these minor details are hard to reconcile, the sure basis of our faith is clearly recorded in all four Gospels -- the tomb is empty, Jesus is alive, we are saved!

Some have attacked Scripture as being unscientific. One particular target of this charge has been the story of creation in Genesis. We should understand that the creation story in Genesis 1 is poetic; it is not intended to be scientific. In fact, none of Scripture was penned as a purely scientific document. Who would want to read it if it were? Or preach it? Still, it is important to note that nothing in the Biblical description of creation contradicts any legitimate scientific discovery. The reader of Genesis 1 can see that the emphasis of the text is not on "How the earth was created?" but on "Who is the Creator?" It is a majestic portrayal of our Great Creator God. This chapter also reveals the wonder of Scripture. God spoke through Moses to create a simple and beautiful story of our world's beginning. This description of the universe in one short chapter has inspired and instructed people of many cultures for thousands of years.

There are some minor inaccuracies in our Bibles of today. For example, the specific numbers in some Old Testament books differ. The sizes of the armies of Israel, and other recorded numbers, are larger in the books of Chronicles than in the books of Kings. There are different theories for these differences. One theory emphasizes the different purposes of the biblical authors. For example, the Chronicler wrote to the Jews who returned home from the Babylonian exile. His version of Israel's history emphasized their former greatness. Since they remembered the shame of their exile, and saw the destruction of their homeland, the writer wanted to inspire them to regain their former greatness. Another possible reason for these minor differences in numbers is scribal errors in the transmission of the text. We do not have the original infallible texts written by the original authors. But we do have many extremely reliable copies of these manuscripts. Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987) illustrated this fact by describing a bridge spanning a flooded river. The water is so high that there is a thin layer of water covering the surface of the road on the bridge. Yet the structure of the bridge remains strong. You may drive across it without fear. The driver has the same confidence on the road surface as he does on the strong, water covered, bridge. So as believers we can have the same confidence in the copies of God's inerrant Word, as we would have in the original manuscripts. The truth of God's Word stands unwavering, even though we do not have the original manuscripts of Scripture. The Bible we have is worthy of our complete trust. The record of Scripture we have is accurate and reliable.

You will soon learn that the Bible is under attack by unbelievers. They may point you to these, and other, difficulties in Scripture. This attack began when the serpent challenged God's command in the Garden of Eden. Consult Bible teachers who can guide you to Scripture and other Christian books to enlarge your understanding and strengthen your faith. You must study well and pray fervently. If you cannot believe the Bible, then nothing is true, and you are wasting your time preaching. We must not hide from the enemies of Scripture, but respectfully listen to them and seek God's wisdom in providing an answer (1 Peter 3.13-16). Make sure your teaching and preaching places any uncertainty on our limited understanding, not on God's perfect Word. Remember it is not our duty to "defend" God or His Word. He is not a man who needs our defense. Someone once asked Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) how he could defend the Bible. He answered, "Like I would defend a lion, open

up its cage and let him defend himself." So preach the Word with clarity, confidence, and courage, God will take care of the rest.

As we seek to understand this principle of harmony, we must interpret Scripture with other Scripture. Because God is the ultimate author of Scripture, it does not contradict itself. Its message is unified because God is one. And as we compare Scripture with Scripture, we see its fuller meaning. For example, consider what the Bible has to say about human governments. According to Romans 13, believers are to "submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established" (v. 1). This verse raises a moral problem. How is it that so many terrible human leaders, who according to this verse have been put in place by God, have been allowed to persecute the Church? We can move toward an answer by comparing Romans 13 with Revelation 13, because Revelation 13 also refers to human governments. It says that the power of some human governments is "beastly" and comes from the "dragon" (v. 2). When the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he claimed to have authority in the kingdoms of the world (Luke 4.5,6). Jesus does not deny his claim. Rather, Jesus intends to win the world back from him, not by worshipping Satan, but by crushing his head (Genesis 3.15). So by comparing Scripture with Scripture, we learn that the devil is the spiritual power behind the evil leaders of this world. This may not make it any easier to endure their persecution, or to understand God's plan in appointing them, but we do understand more by comparing these passages of Scripture. Furthermore, we see that no beast, dragon, devil, or government leader will finally defeat the followers of the Lamb who patiently endure (Revelation 13.10, 14.1-5).

Man himself is better understood through comparing Scripture with itself. There are four different biblical truths about man that must shape our understanding. First, we are created in perfection with dignity and honor (Genesis 1.28, Psalm 8.5). Yet, second, the evidence of this dignity is hard to see; because of sin we are depraved and lost (Romans 3.23). Third, the good news is that all in Christ have become new -- delivered from the penalty and power of sin (Romans 6.4). Fourth, when Jesus returns, or we go to Him, believers will be completely delivered from even the presence of sin and will dwell forever in God's glory (2 Corinthians 5.1). All four teachings form the biblical picture of the complex creature called "man": God creates us, we are fallen from God, we can be redeemed in Christ, and in Him we will be glorified.

We can also better understand sex through a careful look at Scripture. All of society seems to talk about sex, but the church is often silent on this issue. Preachers should preach more sermons about sex, because what people learn from the world on this issue is often dirty and distorted. First, we should realize that, like all of creation, sex is a "very good" gift from God (Genesis 1.31). Adam and Eve were created to enjoy one another in naked innocence as sexual beings (Genesis 2.22-25, Proverbs 5.18,19). But second, their fall into sin brought a curse upon all of creation, including on sex. This is seen in the great sexual perversity of our world (Romans 1.24-27). Third, God's wonderful redemption effects even the believer's sexuality. Sex within the marriage of believers is pleasing to God and is meant to be enjoyable for the man and woman (1 Timothy 4.4). This is true even when only one spouse is a believer (1 Corinthians 7.3-5, Hebrews 13.4). In Christ some are given the special gift of remaining single for His service (Matthew 19.12, 1 Corinthians 7.7,8). And fourth, the wonder of sexual love is only a foretaste of the indescribable love between God and the fully-redeemed believer in Heaven. There the only marriage will be between Christ and His Church. (Matthew 22.30, Ephesians 5.31,32).

Comparing Scripture with itself enables us to have a better understanding of the truth of God and to see the harmony of His message.

Principles of Biblical Interpretation: Modernity

Ancient Scripture has a living message for our modern world. The Bible belongs in today's marketplace, not in a museum. How does God speak through His Word today? The correct answer is vital for us in order to faithfully preach the Scriptures.

When we look at the Bible, it is as if we do so through a pair of glasses. I am not speaking of the prescribed spectacles that can correct our poor vision, but the "glasses" of our own viewpoint. We look at Scripture as we see all of life -- from the perspective of our own understanding, education, experiences, bias, culture, family background, language, and prejudices. Because of these "glasses" of ours, we sometimes try to make the Bible say what we want it to say, instead of seeing God's meaning. Naturally, we are much more familiar with our own world than the ancient world of the Bible. We tend to assume the way we do things today is the way biblical people must have done them too. On the other side of the chasm, the human authors of Scripture did not see our world either. They could never imagine that the poems they penned, the songs they sang, or the letters they wrote would be treasured throughout the earth in the twenty-first century. So we must get into the world of the biblical authors in order to understand their words. It is a challenge to hear the ancient voice of Scripture. It requires the study of history, geography, culture, and languages.

It is also necessary to listen to what the Spirit is saying to us today through the Word, because Scripture is a living sword that penetrates our inner being (Hebrews 4.12). Perhaps we could think of this as listening with "both" of our ears -- hearing both what it meant then, and what it means now. Unless we listen to both the Scripture's ancient meaning and its present application, we cannot preach biblical sermons.

Consider the many genealogies contained in both testaments of the Scriptures. Today they may appear as meaningless lists of strange names. Often we skip over these in our Bible reading; I confess I do. But for the original readers of Scripture, these names were their family members. These names proved they really were God's chosen people and protected their claim to the privileges of their position. Remember the bitter tears Esau cried when his name was left out of the blessing? (Genesis 27.34). So you may ask, "What are the truths for today in these ancient names? If 'every word of Scripture is God-breathed and is useful' (2 Timothy 3.16), then what is the use of these records to me?" In these accounts we learn many truths about man and God. We see that a man's life is short and often unnoticed. Among these names are the greatest men of their day, yet today we do not even know how to pronounce their names correctly. We can note that families are important to the faith, as it is passed on from grandfather to father to son. We can see that history is important to the people of God; it is His story of His world. We can see the accuracy of Holy Scripture -- not one name is missing; God's record is perfect. We can reflect that God also has a book in heaven and rejoice that our names are recorded there. Most of all, we should see God Himself, for He is the central figure of Scripture, and should be the central figure of every sermon. He is a faithful God, a covenant-keeping God, a timeless, eternal God, a God who keeps every promise to His people, a God who has not left Himself without a witness, and a God who knows the names of His people.

So we should listen with "both ears" to the historical accounts of Scripture. Strange places, events, and people -- things very different from our life today -- will confront us. Yet the records of those people's struggles and victories speak to all men everywhere. All of Scripture declares the weakness of man and the glory of God. We should especially note the theme of redemption throughout God's Word. The long lists of genealogies climax with the Name above every name -- Jesus. They reveal how all of Scripture is moving forward to His Cross. From the promise of His bruised heel in the Garden of Eden, to His crushing the serpent's head as He rose from death, we see Jesus in all of Scripture. The purpose of Scripture is "to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3.15).

Trying to listen with "both" ears to the Word of God may lead to one of three responses from people. Some may just quit trying, thinking it is just too much hard work. So -- to use a figure of speech -- they decide to throw out the baby with the bath water! Let me explain what I mean by this expression. The "baby" is most important thing -- the biblical principles and timeless truth of God - which we must be careful to keep. The "water" represents cultural practices, which may change over time. The person who throws out both baby and bath water completely rejects all of God's Word -- what it meant then and what it means now! They give up on trying to read and understand the Bible.

Others may keep both the baby and the bath water. They read the Bible and insist that people do everything it says. If women are told to cover their heads in prayer, they go to the hat shop and buy ten. If Jesus washed His disciple's feet, they do not go to church without a bar of soap and a towel. If pigs are considered unclean, they never enjoy a slice of bacon. If homosexuals are to be stoned, they build a pile of rocks. Their Bible is not hills and valleys and shades of meaning; it is flat, literal, and all of it must be strictly applied. They ignore the time a particular Scripture was written, or its possible cultural meaning.

Instead, I recommend you keep the baby and change the bath water. I am not advocating changing or subtracting from true biblical doctrines. This method of interpretation applies only to practices described by Scripture that are unique to its ancient cultures. I mean you must hold on to that which is the eternal truth of Scripture, and apply it appropriately to today's cultural setting. There is in each text of Scripture a message for today. We must identify, obey, and preach that message. But because human authors wrote Scripture long ago, their situation of life was different from ours today. This practice must be applied with great care.

Three Babies and their Bath Water

Remembering our babies in their bath water, let us consider three ways of interpreting two practices from the Bible. Remember that the "baby" illustrates what is most important; the "water" is very common. Jesus washed his disciples' feet and told his followers they should do the same. "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you should wash one another's feet" (John 13.14). One who would throw out both baby and bath water would throw out the dirty feet too! "After all," they would reason, "we're not wearing sandals on dusty roads like the ancient disciples. We have running water in our homes to do our own bathing." They say the "you" Jesus spoke to in the verse quoted above referred to his disciples in the Upper Room, not believers today. "So," they say, "keep your feet inside your shoes, thank you!"

Those who keep both baby and bath water take this quite literally. Indeed there are churches that practice foot washing as a part of their worship activities today. For them, "foot washing" has become a formal tradition, much like baptism and the Lord's Supper.

What exactly is the "baby" in this passage? The most important thing is the humble servant example of Jesus. We should keep the baby and change the bath water. This may mean we still wash feet today. I remember with great fondness how a Deacon of the church I pastored in Hawaii washed my feet as I entered his home for a meal. This brother's life is characterized by service, so the washing was a natural expression of his love and humility. But washing alone can be a meaningless ritual if it is not done from a servant's heart. Jesus is not trying to create a church ritual of foot washing. The point is that He wants those who follow Him to imitate His humility. This may mean we need to show this love by literally washing feet. But most importantly, this passage means we are to model the love of Jesus to one another all the time. It is especially important for preachers to remember that the Master we proclaim washed His listeners' feet.

In another passage, believers are told to "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (Romans 16.16). This also can be understood in three different ways. The first interpretation rejects this ritual as ancient custom. Perhaps they may appeal to concerns of hygiene, or cultural dignity, or just fear of strangers. Either way, according to this viewpoint, such behavior is not acceptable today. So they say we must not kiss. They reject the baby and the bath water.

Those who keep the baby and the bath water may enjoy this verse. Their literal interpretation might raise some misunderstandings and questions about motives, but they think, "We are told to kiss, so let us kiss!"

This is one practice where we must be careful, because the potential for misunderstanding is great. How do we keep the baby and change the water? It was my privilege to pastor a church of mostly Hawaiian people. Their custom is for men and women to greet one another with a kiss on the cheek. Following the Sunday service, I stood by the church door and kissed many of the women good byes! I enjoyed it. In Central Asia, there is rarely social kissing between men and women, and certainly not in the church. Instead, it is common to see men kissing men. I actually prefer the Hawaiian custom. So, do we follow the Scripture only when we enjoy the kissing? The baby here -- the most important thing -- is not the kiss; it is the kisser! Paul's advice is to extend a warm, genuine greeting to one another -- and it is best done in a way that is culturally understood. In the Orient this may mean a deep bow, in Latin America a strong brotherly embrace, or in other cultures a firm handshake; we can't all be lucky enough to live in Hawaii! But whatever the cultural form of greeting, we must love the family of God.

The Work of a Lifetime

The preacher must be a lifetime student of Scripture. These four principles are helpful guidelines to understanding the Bible: simplicity, history, harmony, and modernity. As we study, we grow in our confidence that the Scriptures truly are the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Today, the same Spirit of God who spoke the Word helps us understand the Word He has spoken. Ask the Spirit for new insight into His Word, as your heart is thrilled,

your preaching will transform the hearts of many. "If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God" (1 Peter 4.11).

4. How Do I Preach? -- The Task of the Preacher

Good Sermons Take Time

About twenty-five years ago, I began two new interests -- playing the guitar and preaching. Today I am a very mediocre guitar player and perhaps a better-than-average preacher. Why the difference? The biggest reason is time.

I have a very nice guitar. I also have a good case that protects it during my travels around the world. Actually, I see the case much more often than the guitar; it sits on the floor right near my bed. Once every few months, I get the guitar out and strum a few chords, until my family insists I put it away. I have been playing the guitar for twenty-five years, though for just a few minutes every couple of months. I have never gone beyond the basics.

By contrast, in the last twenty-five years I have spent much time preparing sermons. One professor recommended: "For every one minute you spend preaching, you should spend one hour in preparation." So according to this rule, for thirty minutes of preaching there should be thirty hours of preparation. There have been many weeks when I followed this guideline. It now takes me fifteen to twenty hours to prepare for the thirty minutes I usually preach. Without long hours of perfecting your craft, you will never be a good preacher -- or a guitar player! Of course, what matters most is *how* you spend those hours. Let me now share how I as a pastor have typically prepared my weekly sermon. I do not think my example is the standard for everyone, but I may help someone who wonders how to prepare sermons in the midst of their busy pastoral schedule.

It takes me a long time to choose what Scripture text to preach. I am captured by so many passages. I often daydream of what it would be like to preach them. I struggle to pick just the right sermon text. For this reason, I find it helpful to determine my sermon series in advance. I prefer to preach a series through a book of the Scripture. Once I have taken the time to decide what the series will be, I am guided for several months.

So here was what my typical week of sermon preparation was like. I began to prayerfully read the sermon text Sunday evening. I was tired from the full day of church activities, so I sought God's refreshment through this given text. Sometimes I read it in various translations for different insights. I prayed, asking God to open the meaning of the text up to me. If it did not speak to me, how could I speak from it to others? I would have a paper and pencil at hand to jot down my initial thoughts, though this first reading was not an intense study session. Sometimes I have used the text as a basis for the family Bible reading that night -- you never know what good sermon ideas the wife and kids may have!

Monday began the typically diverse and busy week of a pastor. This was my day to organize myself for the coming week. I would again read the text, numerous times, and pray for God's insight. I would also read two or three chapters before and after the given text, trying to understand more of the context. As I began to understand what I thought the passage meant, I would compare the views of various commentaries and Bible study books. Sometimes their ideas would confirm my thoughts, other times they would correct my thinking. The Bible was not written yesterday; I thank God for the written insights of God's people through the millennia. But it is essential to remember that The Book of God must measure any book of man.

Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays were often busy days of meetings, visits, and other pastoral duties. I would strive to take at least an hour each day, and sometimes more, to continue my sermon preparation. During many weeks this time was not easy to find. Often it required early mornings, or more often for me, late nights. Looking back, I regret that I spent too much valuable time watching television! I saved much time through the practice of always carrying something to read. There are many minutes of waiting in the course of a day's activities. I carry a pocket-size Bible, and usually another study book. By Thursday, I strove to have the main idea of the text and begin to outline the sub-points. I would work on some fitting illustrations, and preliminary ideas for the introduction and conclusion.

Friday was the day I set aside entirely for sermon preparation. I told church members that Friday was my study day. I said their pastor needed time to prepare a good banquet from God's Word, and most were hungry enough to let me cook. A few were critical that I did not visit them enough, or do this or that, and some of those criticisms were true. Of course there were times when members had medical or family emergencies on Fridays. And as their pastor I had to be with them. On those days I still had to get the sermon done; I just stayed up later into the night. I made it my goal that before Friday was over, the sermon was finished. Sometimes it was in the early hours of Saturday. As a father of three boys, I worked hard to spend Saturday with my family.

During any free time on Saturday and early Sunday, I prayerfully read my notes until the main ideas were well implanted in my mind. I know some great preachers who read full sermon manuscripts in the pulpit, but I never have found this comfortable. I want to look at the people more than at my notes. So, for the actual preaching, I prefer to use just an outline.

My method is one example of how a busy pastor made the necessary sermon preparation time. It was not easy to maintain this study schedule and pastor 150 members, and most importantly, the members of my family. I regret that some vital ministries were sometimes neglected. Yet, I do not regret the choice to emphasize sermon preparation in my pastoral ministry. Good biblical preaching can save hours of counseling if God gives your people ears to hear. This routine worked best for me; you must develop your own plan. At first, young David went out to face Goliath wearing King Saul's armor. Although it was excellent fighting gear, he found it easier to kill giants using rocks and a sling. Choose the battle gear best for you. Make sure sermon preparation receives a significant amount of your time every week.

The Preacher is a Bridge-Builder

The famous Golden Gate Bridge spans the entrance to San Francisco Bay along the Pacific Ocean. It stands as a tribute to the engineering skills and hard work of those who built it in the 1930's. Today it is a landmark known around the world. Our family walked across that bridge one beautiful summer day, and marveled at the great work the builders had done.

As a preacher, you also are a bridge builder. Your sermon must connect biblical texts from the ancient world to your listeners today. I first heard this concept from John Stott. He describes the wide chasm between the Bible and today, and urges us to span it by our preaching.

Some sermons concentrate on the "far side" of the chasm -- the Scriptures. The preacher carefully studies the passage, its context, and meaning for the original hearers. These are all very necessary for a good sermon. The listener learns much about the ancient world, the early Church, and how the biblical writer spoke God's Word to those people. Such messages may be very interesting and informative, yet if they do not apply the Scriptures to today, they are more like a history lesson than a sermon.

Other sermons may concentrate on "our side" of the chasm -- the world today. The preacher may be well aware of the contemporary issues facing the believer, knowing today's philosophies, political climate, popular films, sports heroes, and economic forecast. The sermon may even offer an interpretation of current events. Again, such a message may be very entertaining, but if the preacher does not explain the Scriptures, such a speech is more like a news broadcast than a sermon.

A good sermon should sound like both a history lesson and a news broadcast. The faithful preacher needs a good understanding of "both worlds." He must listen with "both ears," to the message of Scripture and to the cries of this world. He knows that the ultimate need of people today is solved by God's ancient message. He knows that it is his duty to carefully interpret and apply the message to his hearers. So he seeks to build a "bridge" in preaching which connects both worlds. In order to do this, he must dig a deep foundation on both sides of the chasm to make the bridge strong. We must have a good understanding of our text and the world of our hearers. We must know where our hearers "itch" and seek to "scratch" that very spot with the eternal truths of God. It is necessary to know what our text meant as it was written by the human author to his original audience. Then we must know what the Spirit of God is saying through the text to those who listen to our sermon today.

Bridges God Will Use

As we are faithful to build such a bridge, God can "travel across it" into the lives of our hearers. Our simple sermon becomes a tool for God to speak His timeless truth into the hearts of those who listen. Paul brought the message of Jesus, the Messiah of ancient Hebrew Scripture, to the Gentiles of first-century Thessalonica. Describing their reception of his bridge-building preaching, Paul writes, "When you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe" (1 Thessalonians 2.13). Paul writes here that these believers welcomed his message -- which was really God's message. The Spirit of God spoke to them through the Scriptures. Paul brought them a living Word of the Savior. He built a bridge from the Bible to their hearts.

The Apostle Peter found a similar response in the home of Cornelius. "He [Cornelius] and all his family were devout and God-fearing" (Acts 10.2). God spoke to Cornelius through a dream, telling him to invite Peter to share the Word with his family (v. 5). At the same time, God gave Peter a dramatic vision of clean and unclean animals, repeating the vision three times. This was a critical event in the growth of the Christian church. The deep prejudices separating Jew and Gentile may have led to two churches, one for each race. But God makes it very clear that His plan is for one church: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 10.15). Peter had to let go of his Jewish partiality and build the "one body" of Christ. God arranged for Cornelius' men to lead Peter to their master's house. When Peter arrived, he found a large gathering of people, ready to hear God's Word: "Now

we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us" (Acts 10.33). Such a willing attitude to receive the Word should be in everyone's heart. All people are under obligation to respond to God's Word; He will not be ignored. We do not preach for our own reasons, but as servants of God. Through our message, people are confronted with their need of Him. If God speaks, we must listen. If God rebukes, we must repent. If God reveals Jesus, we must have faith. If God makes a promise, we must believe. If God commands, we must obey. If God challenges us to reach out, we must do so with compassion. If God speaks of the future, we must persevere in hope. God rewarded the household of Cornelius with a great blessing because of their eager response to His Word: "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message" (Acts 10.44). God still does this today. Perhaps the words of William Carey should be applied to our preaching ministry: "Expect great things *from God*, attempt great things *for God*."

"A Highway for our God"

John the Baptizer was both a bridge-builder and a highway-maker. As the last Old Covenant prophet, he was privileged to "prepare the way of the Lord." His ministry was prophesied by Isaiah, who wrote, "A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God'" (40.3). John preached hope to Jews who longed for their Messiah. He called the nation of Israel to prepare for the Lord Jesus Christ. John described himself as a "friend who attends the bridegroom, who waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears his bridegroom's voice. He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3.29,30). These are the words of one who gave his life for the Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus. What a stirring example of how the preacher should exalt the Lord and humble himself. It should be our greatest joy when our listeners hear the voice of Jesus through the words of our sermons.

The goal of our preaching is that our hearers will encounter the Lord Jesus. Some of our hearers need to meet Him for the first time; they are strangers to the grace of God and lost in their sin. We need to preach Him without shame, knowing that the gospel "is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1.16). Paul modeled this courage as he spoke in Corinth. He was trembling, but God used his message as "a demonstration of the Spirit's power" (1 Corinthians 2.1-5). We preachers should imitate his unwavering focus on Jesus: "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (v. 2). Like Paul, believers also need a meeting with their Lord, because it is only Jesus who can fully meet our needs, comfort our hurts, challenge our complacency, and forgive our sins. Our message today is like Paul's to the church: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you" (1 Thessalonians 5.28).

Every sermon must focus on Jesus, because all of Scripture finds its fulfillment in Him. This was the lesson He taught on Easter afternoon. The risen Jesus joined two discouraged disciples as they aimlessly walked to a village called Emmaus (Luke 24.13-35). The hopes of these two had been buried in the tomb with their crucified Master. They "had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel" (v. 21), but his execution ended this thinking, or at least they thought it had. How wonderful that Jesus Himself, raised from the dead, now stood beside them. Yet, "they were kept from recognizing him" (v. 16). Then He opened their eyes to understand Scripture: "And beginning with Moses and the Prophets, he explained to them all what was said in the Scriptures concerning himself" (v. 27). Later, God opened their

eyes to see Jesus. That afternoon, they were privileged to have a private seminar on the Old Testament with the author, and the subject, of the book. He taught them that the story of Jesus did not begin with the New Testament. He is there on the first page of Scripture, working with His Father in Creation: "the world was made through him" (John 1.10). Jesus taught them that He was the key to understanding the Old Testament; and the Old Testament is the key to understanding Him. After such a study, no wonder they said, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (v. 32).

As we read the Old Testament, we encounter many people, places, and events. We should be careful to understand and explain each cultural setting and historical background. We also must develop the theological themes of the text and make practical application to today. But the Pharisees also explained all these Old Testament truths, with a detailed knowledge we will never have. Yet, Jesus said to them "Woe to you, blind guides!" (Matthew 23.16). Why would he be so bold with these respected teachers of Israel? This is because they had everything -- except Jesus -- in their teaching. He is the main point of the Old Testament. He said, "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms" (Luke 24.44). We do not preach the Old Testament properly unless we show how it is fulfilled in Jesus. This is what He told the Hebrew scholars, "These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5.39). He is the promised Son of Eve who crushed the serpent's head, He is the blessing given through Abraham, He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, He is the prophet greater than Moses, He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, He is the commander of the Lord's army seen by Joshua, He is the mighty angel of God who appeared to Samson's parents, He is David's Son and David's Lord, He is the one greater than Solomon, He is the Servant of God in Isaiah, He stood in the fire with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, He is the Desire of all Nations, and He is the Lord who suddenly came to His Temple. We have not preached the Old Testament properly if our listeners have not seen Him.

We must speak even more about Jesus as we preach from the New Testament. It begins with four different presentations of the "gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1.1). The story of the Church of Jesus begins on Pentecost, when He sends the Spirit. Luke's two-volume testimony of Jesus is the longest writing of the New Testament. The first volume, his gospel, records the ministry of Jesus on earth. Volume two, the Book of Acts, proclaims the ministry of the risen Jesus from heaven (Acts 1.1,2). The principal person of Acts is the Exalted Jesus, working by His Holy Spirit, through the Church, which was led by His apostles. Each of the New Testament letters begins with a blessing for the readers: "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 1.1-7). The last book of the Bible is a majestic portrait, a Revelation of Jesus Christ. He is the Glorified Lord standing in His Church, the Worthy Lamb slain for the sins of His people, the Valiant Warrior who defeats Satan, the Bridegroom with His Bride, and the God who will dwell forever with us. A good New Testament sermon is a Christ-centered sermon. We must see Him throughout all the Scriptures.

We must preach Jesus because He is the only Savior of the world. The greatest need of our hearers is that they be saved from their sins, and hence from the wrath of God. Surely we must never overlook their many other needs, both physical and spiritual. But it is our sin that can send us to hell for eternity; and it is only Jesus who accomplished the "atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2.2). For all eternity, the redeemed will sing their

praises to the "Lamb who was slain" (Revelation 5.12). Our sermons should begin that song now. In a world filled with many religions and philosophies, our sermons must clearly declare that Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14.6). Our messages should be filled with His name because "Salvation is found in no one else" (Acts 4.12).

To leave Jesus out of the sermon is to risk preaching salvation by our own works. For example, we may preach about Noah's ark. There is much we could say. The world then was an evil place, even as it is today. The righteous life and labor of Noah is commendable. The parade of animals reveals the wonder of God's creation. The flood is an awesome demonstration of God's powerful wrath. The appearance of dry land speaks of mercy and a new start. So we may conclude our message with an appeal to follow the noble example of Noah: "Be good, like Noah was!" But wait! Is this the Good News? Not only is it not good news, it is not true. The truth is, Noah was not good and neither are we -- certainly not good enough to earn God's favor. In His eyes we are all caught naked and drunk (Genesis 9.21). Before Scripture speaks of Noah's "righteousness," it says, "Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord" (Genesis 6.8,9). So Noah was chosen by grace, not by works. When the storm of God's wrath bursts over our heads, we will not be able to climb into Noah's Ark. The only hope -- for Noah and for us -- is the safety and protection of being "in Christ." Only Jesus is the "ark" that protects us from the coming deluge of God's wrath (1 Peter 3.18-22). Looking back on his Jewish faith, and speaking of its blessing to the Gentiles, Peter declared, "We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are" (Acts 15.11). So salvation is by grace in both Covenants. And in both Covenants grace is received through faith; so we read, "By his faith (Noah) condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith" (Hebrews 11.7). Noah is in heaven, not for being a good shipbuilder or preacher, but because he had a great Savior -- One who is ours, too. Do not preach a gospel of human works; Jesus must be the Good News of your sermon.

Jesus is also the perfect example for believers. Recently there was a fashion in the English-speaking church -- W.W.J.D. Christian young people are wore wristbands and T-shirts with these letters; meaning "What Would Jesus Do?" What a great question. Every believer should ask this about every decision. Jesus is to be both our Savior and our example. Scripture is filled with commands to be like Jesus. We are to have "the same attitude of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2.5), to please our neighbors like Jesus (Romans 15.2,3), to "Accept one another, just as Christ accepted you" (Romans 15.7), to wash one another's feet like Jesus did (John 13.14,15), and even to lay down our life for others like Jesus (Mark 10.44,45). Christian marriage is also based on His example: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church" (Ephesians 5.25). Of course we will never be completely like Jesus, but that should not stop us from trying!

A final reason our sermons should be filled with Jesus is because He is the goal of human history. The destination of all earthly activity will be fulfilled when God "brings all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Ephesians 1.10). Our hearers should see all their life, and every earthly event, as the outworking of His sovereign plan; He is the "First and the Last" (Revelation 1.17). At the close of history, every mouth will confess His Lordship (Philippians 2.11). And in the Holy City of God the Lamb will be its "temple" and its "lamp" (Revelation 21.22,23).

What is the task of the Preacher? It is to build a bridge for Jesus, which He might travel from the pages of Scripture into the hearts of those who listen today. Billy Graham has testified to feeling like a "spectator" watching the Lord preach through Him, an instrument in the hand of a mighty God. May He give us such experiences, that He might become greater and we might become less. An elder in the Church of Scotland once prayed this before the preacher spoke: "O Lord, we thank Thee for our brother. Now blot him out! Reveal Thy glory to us in such blazing splendor that he should be forgotten."

5. What Is Being Preached? -- Categories of Sermons

"Truth through personality": this is how Phillips Brooks (1835-1893) once defined preaching. How true. By listening to different preachers, we can hear a demonstration of God's creative wonder. One hundred preachers, all preaching from the same text of Scripture, could preach a hundred different sermons -- and each sermon could be faithful to Scripture, and pleasing to God. The God who created thousands of flowers has ordained that His Word be declared through preachers of every color! He who is the composer of every sound desires that His Word be announced in every language!

Preachers on Preaching

Here are definitions of their work by some of my favorite preachers:

· "Preaching is the communication of God's truth by God's servants to meet the needs of people."

-Warren Wiersbe

“ A sermon is an applicatory declaration, spoken in God's name and for his praise, in which some part of the written Word of God delivers through the preacher some part of its message about God and godliness in relation to those whom the preacher addresses.”

- J.I.

Packer

- "1. The authoritative, timely and purposeful communication of God's truth as deposited in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments,
- 2. through the personality of human instruments called by God, commissioned by Christ, and anointed by the Holy Spirit,
- 3. in humble and prayerful dependence upon the grace of God, the efficacy of Christ's work, and the operation of the Spirit
- 4. to the minds, hearts, and lives of any and all audiences, sinners and saints, men and women, old and young,
- 5. with the Gospel as the key to the Kingdom, having discriminatory, healing, and applicatory power unto regeneration, justification, and sanctification,
- 6. in a well prepared, structured, orderly, clear, imaginative, direct, moving, and persuasive manner,
- 7. all to the glory of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit."

-Hendrik Krabbendam

· "Preaching is a transaction between the preacher and the listener. It does something for the soul of man, for the whole person, the entire man; it deals with him in a vital and radical manner."

-D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

· "To open up the inspired text with such faithfulness and sensitivity that God's voice is heard and His people obey Him."

-John Stott

I want to consider and compare the two most popular types of sermons among evangelicals. I will call them "topical" and "textual". The names are slightly misleading, because both kinds of messages are based on texts from the Bible -- but the texts are presented through different methods. Both types of sermons can be used and blessed by God.

Unfortunately, there are preachers who don't really preach from the Bible at all. Perhaps the best category of such "messages" would be "individual." Their style is to string together a bunch of their own thoughts, or those of others, and talk about them. They may even use the Bible as a diver uses a springboard to enter a swimming pool. They bounce off it into the hot air of their own ideas, thrilling listeners with their own abilities. Many such orators fill the pulpits of churches. But I trust that you realize the importance of preaching from the Scripture, not just about the Scripture. Only God's Word has life-changing power.

Topical Sermons

Topical sermons begin with the preacher selecting a particular topic. His idea may have come from something he read, a need in the church, an event in the world, a problem he is facing, or from any other source. Once the topic is chosen, he searches Scripture for verses that speak to the issue. The preacher then arranges the verses into an order he feels is best for his presentation. He will also prioritize the particular texts to be included in the message. There are often more verses than can be discussed in one sermon. When this occurs, he may develop a series on the topic. Some topical series that I have preached were, "Jesus in the Old Testament," "Worship," "The Christian Family," "The Christian and the Government," and "Fruit of the Spirit". This process is like the work of a systematic theologian who studies all the Scripture to discover its message about a particular doctrine. Topical sermons are useful for presenting Biblical teaching on a specific topic. There are books, such as concordances, Bible dictionaries, and "Topical Bibles," which can help the preacher find Scripture related to various topics. There are many wonderful preachers who preach topical sermons that are strong and biblical.

Advantages of Topical Preaching

- **MEMORABLE** - A topical sermon helps the listener to remember the Biblical view of a particular topic.
- **THOROUGH** - The topical method is the best for presenting a thorough study of a particular doctrine or topic.
- **SPECIFIC** - Sometimes it is helpful for the growth of your hearers to teach through an important series of topical messages. For example, the Attributes of God, How to Grow as a Believer, How to Witness, How to Pray, etc. A series of topical messages is a helpful tool to meet this need.
- **AUTHORITATIVE** - There are times, especially during a crisis, that people need to know that "The Bible says *this* about *that*." A topical message from the whole of the Scriptures can help to end disputes about an issue. This is because you present the whole weight of Scripture, not just one passage about a particular topic.

- **EASIER** - Most new preachers find it easier to prepare topical sermons. Often they find it difficult to dig deeply into one passage of Scripture in their early days of preaching. However, what may be “easier” for the preacher is not always best for the church. So, be willing to work hard in your preparation every time you preach.

Concerns about Topical Preaching

When you preach topical sermons, be aware of these possible problems:

- **BIBLICAL?** Make sure you are really preaching from the message of Scripture, not just finding verses that support what you have already decided you want to say. In all of our preaching we must humble ourselves before the Scripture.
- **CONNECTIONS?** Make sure you show the clear connection between the texts of Scripture and the topic. Your "topic" should always be the "topic" of the writer of your Scripture text.
- **CONTEXT?** Make sure you understand and clearly explain the context of the Scriptures you select for your sermon. Show your listeners the importance of examining a verse in its biblical context.
- **BALANCED?** Make sure that the topics you select week after week offer a balanced Spiritual diet for your people. Are your topics just "your favorites," or do they reflect the main themes of the Scriptures? We should be able to say to the church, as Paul did to the Ephesian elders, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Acts 20.27).
- **WHOLE BOOKS?** Make sure your people get an understanding of whole books of Scripture through other Bible studies or teachings that your church supports.
- **SPIRITUAL GROWTH?** Make sure you maintain a strong walk with God through prayer and Scripture reading, because it becomes difficult to come up with new topics week after week over many years.

Textual Sermons

Life is too short and hell is too hot to waste time arguing that one type of preaching is better than another. The only point worth fighting about is that our sermons are truly biblical. As I said earlier, preachers are as different as the flowers God has made -- would that we were all as sweet! I have preached both topical and textual sermons, but my preference is textual.

Textual sermons are based on one main passage of Scripture. The textual preacher studies a particular passage to discover its meaning for both the original audience and today. Having found the meaning of the text, he begins to make a sermon outline. He must wrestle with the text, prayerfully seeking the best way to explain the main idea with supporting sub-points. Gradually the "skeleton" of the sermon forms. Then he covers the skeleton with the "flesh" of textual explanation and application. He often includes appropriate illustrations to

shed light onto the meaning for the text. Lastly, he thinks of a fitting opening and closing. It is often difficult. In the next few chapters we will look at these steps in greater detail.

The biggest difference between topical and textual preaching is in how the preacher gets his main points. The topical preacher arranges his ideas from the many texts he selects for his message. The textual preacher's points come from his one chosen text. The textual preacher's purpose is to preach that specific passage -- no more, no less. This can be a hard discipline. The pastor comes to the pulpit with many problems facing him and his people that week. It is quite tempting to insert a word or two about those problems -- or even to try and make the text say it for us! There may be many good, biblical, ideas a pastor can say in his sermon, but if they are not from the text, and he wants to preach a textual message, those good ideas should be saved for another sermon. So the textual preacher must love to dig deeply into the chosen text of Scripture and bring out and apply its truths. (The typical Kazakh church has two or three preachers each Sunday; maybe this is a good way to cover many areas needing to be discussed. But I wonder if "time-conscious" Americans would stand for more than one sermon per worship service on a regular basis? And as Kazakhstan becomes more westernized, perhaps people there will reach the same level of American spiritual immaturity!)

Why I Prefer Textual Sermons:

- **READY TO BEGIN** - I know what text I am preaching in advance. As I said earlier, if I do not have a plan for preaching, I waste much time trying to decide what text or topic to preach. There are so many great ones!
- **FEW RESOURCES** - I can make the most of my study books. Buying or borrowing commentaries on books of the Bible may not be easy. If I have a commentary on a certain Bible book, I make the best use of it by preaching through the entire book.
- **MAXIMIZE STUDY TIME** - I can make the most of my study time. As I move into a series on a Bible book, I become increasingly familiar with the human author's style and purpose. I begin to "think like them" to some degree, and can better communicate the meaning of their message.
- **MORE ISSUES STUDIED** - I am forced to deal with issues I might not choose myself. A Bible book covers many different topics -- more than what I would imagine from my own topical sermon planning -- and the various issues are presented "in the context" of the book itself. As a result, the church may receive a more "balanced" diet of the themes in Scripture.
- **CONTEXT UNDERSTOOD** - It is easier to present the meaning of a text in context. I do not need to present the background of several different texts, as is necessary in topical sermons. I can concentrate my sermon time by setting forth the background, meaning, and message of one text.
- **LESS CONTROVERSY** - Sensitive issues are presented through the natural development of a series. If one Sunday I announce the text "Wives submit to your husbands," people will know that we have come to chapter 5 in our study of Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

People will not have to wonder if I quarreled with my wife that week! They need not wonder if I am trying to "get back" at a particularly stubborn woman in the church. "No personal attack intended; I am just a textual preacher doing my job!"

- **BIBLE KNOWLEDGE MEASURED** - It is easier for the church leaders to monitor the member's knowledge of Scripture. While I am preaching one series, I can be praying with the church leaders about what Bible book should be preached next. That way, it is possible to organize a balanced teaching program for the entire church. The Sunday sermon should be supplemented with Bible studies, home meetings, youth groups, Sunday school classes, and your recommendations for personal Bible reading. The strong church is also a "Bible school." May God help us to train more men and women to proclaim His Word. "The Lord announced the word, and great was the company of those who proclaimed it" (Psalm 68.11).
- **EFFECTIVE TRAINING** - My favorite reason for textual preaching is that it equips the members to read and understand the Bible for themselves. From last Sunday's message they can anticipate the next passage in my preaching series. (It was my practice to distribute my proposed preaching schedule for several months for the church members' prayer and personal study.) They become familiar with the styles and themes of the human authors of the Scripture, and begin to see these as they read their Bibles. Sometimes topical preaching makes people wonder, "How did the preacher know that Romans 5 is connected to Genesis 3 and 1 Corinthians 15? I guess a person needs to attend seminary to understand the Bible." Then they stop trying to read for themselves and wait for next Sunday to see what interesting string of Scriptures the preacher will join together. The joy of the textual preacher - or any preacher - is to hear a believer say, "Pastor, thanks to your preaching, I understand and enjoy my Bible reading very much!"

Concerns about Textual Preaching

Although I prefer textual preaching, there are some possible problems:

- **FALSE PROMISE?** Sometimes a "textual" message becomes "topical" -- or even "individual." This can happen when there is a discrepancy between the text of the sermon and the message outline. Sometimes the preacher reads an entire chapter of Scripture, but then speaks only about one verse or phrase. Another common mistake is to take one verse out of its context and then use it as a "springboard" to dive into a pool of one's own ideas. There is nothing wrong with preaching on just one verse. Many verses, especially in the writings of Paul, demand more than one sermon to understand them. In such a case, it is best to present the sermon as the exposition of just that one verse. A key to good textual preaching is balance. If you promise a sermon on a whole section of Scripture, then fulfill your promise.
- **WEARINESS?** Sometimes people become tired of a long series of sermons from one Bible book. Starting in the 1950's, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones of the Westminster Chapel in London spent fourteen years preaching through "Romans." Most congregations today would not be as patient, and few preachers have the skills he had. It is possible to divide longer books into a shorter series. For example, when I preached through the book of Genesis I first preached a series on chapters 1 - 11. Then I did a series on a New Testament letter. Then I returned to Genesis for a series on the life of Abraham (chapters

12 - 25). It may be best for a sermon series to be no longer than a few months; then you may come back to that particular Bible book another time. Be sensitive to the maturity level and needs of your congregation.

- **FRESH?** Each sermon in the series should stand alone. It is not a good idea to say, "As we saw in our sermon last week...." There will always be someone who did not hear the sermon last week and will feel left out. There will also be some who did hear it, and did not like it! So leave last week alone. Preach a fresh message every week.
- **LEFT OUT?** New members may feel that they cannot catch up. When new members begin to come, we must be careful to make them comfortable enough to "join in to" the series we are preaching. Do not make them feel that, "If you did not hear the entire series, you will never understand this week's sermon!"
- **TRAPPED?** You, the preacher, may feel trapped into your chosen series. This has honestly never happened to me. I thank God for making the text fresh and alive in my heart as I approached it each week. But some preachers have felt trapped in a series they no longer enjoyed. This may be a sign of general spiritual "dryness". One solution may be a concentrated time of "refreshment" in the Word and prayer – perhaps a day or two of rest and retreat. Of course, your sermon plan need not be "etched in stone." If you need to take a break from a series do so. But if this becomes a pattern you may be wise to develop topical messages and short series so that your people do not become discouraged or even distrusting. Even preaching, like all work, has been affected by Eden's curse (Genesis 3.19). It will not always be "fun." But it is an amazing privilege to work in God's Holy Word!
- **INTERRUPTIONS?** There are times when you should interrupt the series and preach another message. Perhaps that week a very significant event happened in the world, nation, or church family. Examples of such events would be a natural disaster, major accident, national election, death of a leading church member, or a national holiday. It may be foolish or insensitive to preach about something else when all the members are talking about that big event. They may need to hear the "Word of the Lord" on that particular topic. It was rare for me to interrupt a sermon series. I sensed God's leading even as I prayerfully selecting preaching passages months in advance. It often seemed like He ordered the events of that week to fit the sermon text! But there were times that I would interrupt a series because of a significant event which I felt needed a special message, especially at Christmas and Easter.

The Preacher's Goal

No matter what type of sermon we prefer, our purpose in preaching should be the same as that of the Apostle Paul: "We proclaim Him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all His energy, which so powerfully works in me" (Colossians 1.28,29).

This great text can be divided into a three-point sermon about our ministry:

- 1) Our Goal: that our hearers will stand as mature believers in Christ, faithful until the end - *"so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor"*

- 2) Our Message: Jesus -- crucified, risen, and coming again. *"We proclaim Him"*
- 3) Our Strength: the power of the living Lord Jesus in us. *"all His energy, which so powerfully works in me"*

Our goal is Jesus in others, our message is Jesus in the Scriptures, and our strength is Jesus in us. May He be praised!

6. Where Do I Begin? -- Planning an Expository Sermon

We have considered many vital issues about preaching; now we will begin to put a sermon together. Preaching is both a science and an art. It is a science because there are certain principles of interpretation and communication to be understood and followed. It is an art because each preacher will develop his own unique style. Most new preachers sound, and can sometimes even look, like their pastors and seminary professors. This is not wrong or surprising, because we learn by imitation. It takes preachers several years of preaching to develop their own style. But any preacher who wants to be used by God must begin the same way.

Begin With God

Preaching is a spiritual work. We all know this, but it is easy to forget. There have been many times when I thought, "This morning I do not need to read my Bible and pray, because I am going to work on my sermon!" I wrongly believed that just thinking about a sermon is enough for my daily spiritual growth. I am ashamed to admit this. But I share this so that no one would follow my bad example. I need to always remember that God adopted me as a son before He called me to be a servant. God is more than our Master; He is also our Heavenly Father. It should be our greatest joy to be in His presence, and this joy is our strength in ministry (Nehemiah 8.10). Not only are we God's children, Jesus calls us His "friends." Through this intimate friendship we learn God's truth. Jesus says, "Everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15.15). Our most important "identity" is not as a preacher but as a child of God – and as a friend of Jesus.

Select the Passage

Not only do we begin with God, we must rely on Him throughout our sermon preparation. The next step is to select a text. This decision is necessary whether you are planning a topical or a textual sermon. Of course, the choice is somewhat easier if you have begun a textual series through a particular book of Scripture. Yet, you still must determine how much of the chosen book you will share with your hearers each week. I prefer to plan out my sermon series several months in advance, because it takes me too long to make this decision every week. What if, for example, you decide to preach a series of messages from the Gospel of John? This is a great choice. (In fact, I suggest your first sermon series in a church should be from one of the four Gospels. It is best to begin a new ministry with a clear presentation of the person and work of Jesus. Both believers and non-believers need this instruction.) Again, how would you select a passage from John?

You should first make a personal study of the entire book. Read it carefully to see its structure and plan. G. Campbell Morgan (1863–1945), a man with limited formal education, was used by God to be a great preacher at Westminster Chapel in London. It was his practice to read a passage at least 40 times as he began his preparation. Each of the four Gospel writers has a unique emphasis in their presentation of Jesus. You can see that John is different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke in several ways. John writes a purpose statement for His Gospel: "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name" (John 20.31). John divides his presentation of Jesus into two main sections, Chapters 1 -12 (His Public Ministry), and Chapters 13 - 21 (His Private Ministry). He records several long sermons and conversations of Jesus the others

do not. Jesus is presented as the Son of God and Savior of the world. John lists different "signs" of Jesus as the Son of God (2.11, 2.23, 4.54, 20.30). John also presents seven "I Am" statements of Jesus: "the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, the Door, the Good Shepherd, the Resurrection and the Life, the True Vine, and the Way, the Truth, and the Life." Studying the Scriptures, sometimes with the aid of other study books, will help you to get a good overview.

Considering that John's Gospel is twenty-one chapters long, you may want to divide your preaching of this book into several smaller series. For example, I chose to preach a series on the first section of the book, Chapters 1 - 12. I planned to go back to the remaining part, Chapters 13 - 21, after a series in another book. (This second half of John's Gospel would be a good sermon series to present during the Easter season.) Another approach would be to present a series of only seven sermons on John; using a topical presentation of the seven "I Am" statements. This could be a great evangelistic series for presenting the claims of Jesus. Each of the seven claims could be presented from the context of the passages where it is found. As a result, these topical messages would be based on a solid textual foundation.

If you determine to do a more detailed study through John, then how will you preach the first chapter? You will notice that it is fifty-one verses long. This is too long to adequately present in one sermon, not just because of its length, but because it is so filled with truths that need explanation and application. (I preached only one sermon on the sixty-seven verses of Genesis 24 because the entire chapter details just one main point -- God's provision of a wife for the chosen son, Isaac.) But John Chapter 1 is filled with too many different truths about Jesus and His ministry for just one sermon. Notice the main sections of this chapter. Verses 1 - 18 are clearly an introduction of the entire Gospel. John begins from eternity past, we are told that Jesus is with God -- indeed, He is God. I have preached one sermon from all of John 1.1-18. But when I preached through this Gospel another time, I divided the passage into five different sermons taken from verses 1-3, 4-9, 10-13, 14, and 15-18. In each of these five sermons I dug into the particular verses, trying to bring out their meaning.

Selecting a smaller preaching portion requires a more detailed study of the passage. Perhaps as you begin your ministry, one sermon on John 1.1 - 18 would be as much as you want to attempt, as I did at first. I had been a preacher for almost twenty years when I dug five sermons out of those eighteen verses, and it was not easy. I know of one pastor who preached fifteen different sermons from John 1.1-18! Whether the passage is long or short, your duty is to faithfully explain and apply the text, and to prayerfully trust God to bless His people through your message. Again, the choice of how much Scripture to cover depends on how many different truths are contained in the verses, your own ability, the study resources available, and the maturity and needs of your listeners.

Some preachers select a small phrase for their preaching text and attempt to dig very deeply into each word. But sometimes they move far away from the text as they preach it. Such preaching can be filled with turning to other passages, doctrinal presentations, and extended illustrations. So this "deep study" can wander far away from the very text they are attempting to explain. By the end of such sermons the hearer has learned more about other Bible passages and doctrines, but not very much about the selected sermon text. Do not try and be so deep and profound that your hearers miss the simple beauty of the "truth that is in Jesus" (Ephesians 4.21).

What if you decided to preach a series from Genesis? As you begin with the first chapter, you would need to make a decision. Will you preach one sermon for each of the six days of creation? Or will one sermon on all six days be enough? Pastor James Boice (1938-2000) preached fourteen different sermons from Genesis 1. The church he served in Philadelphia is near the University of Pennsylvania campus. Many highly educated people attend the church. In several of his sermons he carefully compared various theories of creation with Scripture. This was very helpful to believers who faced the attacks of educated unbelievers in the university setting. But few pastors know enough about scientific theories to make such comparisons. I certainly do not! I praise God for giving Dr. Boice both the knowledge and the pastoral concern to present these messages to his people. When I preached through Genesis, I preached two sermons on chapter 1. One sermon emphasized the Creation itself, with the focus on God the Creator. My second sermon focused on God's creation of man.

Another example of how to preach through Genesis comes from my first pastor, the Reverend Charles N. Svendsen. He preached an eight-sermon series on the entire fifty chapters of Genesis. It must have been effective, because I remember his plan more than thirty years later! He divided the book into four events and four people with one sermon for each. The four events were the Creation, the Fall into Sin, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel. The four people were Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

Even if you decide to preach textual sermons, there is not just ONE correct way of determining your preaching portions. Seek the counsel and prayer support of mature leaders as you plan your preaching series. Together with them you can honestly consider your own abilities, the study resources available to you, and the present needs of the church.

Packet! -- The Unified Theme

One of the first Russian words I learned after moving to Kazakhstan was "packet". Perhaps I learned it quickly because the word sounds so much like the English word for "package." But the true reason was that I really needed that word. I was shopping in the "magazine" (shop) and had more objects than I could carry. The clerk gave me a plastic bag, or "packet," used around the world. It held all my groceries together in one bundle, which made them easy to carry. Do your sermons have more facts and details than people can carry? Do you provide a "packet" for those listening to your sermon? A good sermon has one unified theme holding it all together.

The need for a unified theme in your sermon is the most important factor in determining your preaching text. Let us look back to John 1.1-18 to illustrate this point. If we decide to preach just one sermon from this passage, it could be outlined like this:

Title / Theme -- "Jesus Is God with Us" -- John 1.1-18

1. He is with the Father vs. 1 - 5
2. He was with His disciples vs. 6 - 11, 14,15
3. He is with us now vs. 12 - 13, 16-18

Here is a sermon outline from just one verse from that passage, John 1.14:

Title / Theme -- "Jesus the True Tabernacle of God" -- John 1.14

This message expanded the phrase John uses in this verse, "the Word *tabernacled* among us." Then I looked back to the Old Testament Tabernacle to see it's parallel to Jesus. The words from John in italics were the link between the Tabernacle image and its fulfillment in Jesus.

1. God's Dwelling Among Men / *Word* (Exodus 25.8,9)
2. Meeting Place for God and Man / *became Flesh* (Exodus 25.22)
3. Law of God Kept / *Truth* (Hebrews 9.4)
4. Blood of Sacrifices Taken / *Grace* (Leviticus 16.15,16)
5. Spirit of God Resides / *Glory* (Exodus 40.34,35)
6. Center of Camp / *dwelt among us* (Numbers 2.1,2,17)

Both sermons, if the interpretation and application are faithful to Scripture, have the potential for being used by God for the blessing of His people. Both sermon outlines have sub-points. But notice carefully that the points are not about different things. Each sub-point, whether you have two, three, or ten, should open up the meaning and apply the one main theme of the sermon. A good sermon has one main point.

Determining the one main point of our sermon is helpful for both the preacher and his hearers. The preacher needs to narrow the focus of his study as he prepares. This is because we gather many ideas as we prepare our sermons. Our own meditation on the text should be very fruitful, giving us many insights. Then we should read commentaries and study books that will give us many more thoughts. Do we preach every idea we can come up with in our study of the passage? No! First we must prayerfully determine the main theme of the passage. Sometimes we will realize it is necessary to preach more than one sermon on the passage, because it holds more than one important theme. Other times, we will have to make a difficult decision between two strong themes. Once you select the main theme, you then organize the verses to explain and apply the truth of this theme. If a truth does not fit under the umbrella of your chosen theme, it does not belong in the sermon. Remember that your sermon is a message from a specific text to instruct and inspire God's people. You are not trying to say everything that could be said about the text. This concept is like the difference between hunting with a rifle and a shotgun. The shotgun is loaded with a cartridge containing thousands of tiny pellets. The ammunition flies out the barrel of the gun in every direction. The rifle, on the other hand, contains one bullet that travels straight and deep into the target. A good sermon is like that rifle. You have a specific target and prepare a message to penetrate deeply into the lives of your listeners. The wise preacher does not use a shotgun, packed full of many small ideas. Instead, he hunts with a single-bullet rifle. His sermon has one main theme.

The listener also appreciates this unity of theme in the message, because he can go home with his "packet." He may have several different truths inside, but they all fit together in the one unified theme. The wise preacher knows that if he gives the helpful "packet" of God's truth, the happy listeners will be back next week to receive another one.

Here are some examples of unified sermon outlines of Bible texts provided by my good friend, the Reverend John N. Svendsen, founder of the One Way Inn Christian Coffee House:

Title / Theme -- "Our Great God" -- Psalm 48

1. He Is Our Glory vs. 1-3
2. He Is Our Guard vs. 5-8
3. He Is Our Guide vs. 9-13

Title / Theme -- "Hannah - A Good Mother" -- 1 Samuel 1

1. She Prays for Her Child's Birth v. 11
2. She Cares for Her Child's Body v. 23
3. She Cares for Her Child's Soul v. 28

Title / Theme -- "The Preacher's Work" -- Ezra 7.10

1. Study the Scriptures v. 10a
2. Obey the Scriptures v. 10b
3. Teach the Scriptures v. 10c

Title / Theme -- "Pictures of a Pastor" -- 1 Thessalonians 2.7-12

1. He Is a Mother v. 7
2. He Is a Brother v. 9
3. He Is a Father v. 11

Title / Theme -- "The Heart of the Gospel" -- 1 Peter 3.18

1. The Cause of Christ's Death -- "*Christ died for sins*"
2. The Completion of Christ's Death -- "*once for all*"
3. The Contrast in Christ's Death -- "*the righteous for the unrighteous*"
4. The Consequences of Christ's Death -- "*to bring you to God*"

In these outlines Pastor John provides a good example of a unified theme. He states the theme clearly and each of the sub-points further explains the main point. The sermons are about one main theme, not many different ones.

Show Them How You Got That Point -- Your Interpretation

A good sermon not only explains the meaning of a text, it also reveals your process of interpretation. In my sermon outline from John 1.1-18 the theme was -- "Jesus Is God with Us." The third sub-point was "He is with us now" from verses 12 - 13 and 16-18. Why did I summarize those verses with that point? John the Apostle makes a sharp contrast between verses 11 and 12. Those who do not receive Him (v. 11) are obviously not with Him, but those who do receive Him (v. 12) are God's children. To be a child of God means to have many blessings; one of them is to be with Him -- now and forever (Romans 8.15-17). In fact, the blessings of salvation are limitless, John says; "we have all received one blessing after another" (v.16). John makes another contrast in verse 17, between the "law" of Moses and the "grace and truth" of Jesus. The spiritual experience of the Israelites was often characterized by distance. In the Old Covenant, God is occasionally described as near His people (Psalm 139.17). But the concept of His nearness is emphasized much more in the New Covenant. His Old Covenant presence was manifest in fire and clouds in the sky, and in smoke and thunder

on Mt. Sinai. His glory was hidden behind the thick curtains of the tabernacle in the unapproachable Most Holy Place. But Jesus brings God near, and He makes the unseen God visible (v. 18). For these reasons, I believe it is correct to interpret the verses by saying of Jesus: "He is with us now."

It would be wrong for me to assume that those listening to my sermon would make these connections between my "points" and the "text" on their own. It is my task as the preacher to show them how I made the connections. If I tell them the text "means" that Jesus is with us now, it is my responsibility to "prove it" to them through my sermon. To do this, I need to point their attention to the specific words and phrases of the text leading me to my conclusion. In this way the sermon is also a Bible study. Of course, this works best when both preacher and listeners have their Bibles open. In just a few sentences we are to make these connections using the "tools" of grammar, historical background studies, biblical interpretation, theological insight, logic, and rhetorical skills – while we make it simple enough for a child to understand! It is a challenge to preach well. As we do so we will help our listeners interpret and understand the text. Then as they read their Bibles they will grow to mature believers.

Preach to Everyone -- Your Diverse Audience

We should preach with a pastoral concern for all our members. But things do not always turn out like we plan. Sometimes as I prepare, I think of how one point will be especially helpful, for example, for "Bill." Then on Sunday morning I study the faces of my listeners, and Bill is absent! Such experiences remind me that I must prepare my message for everyone.

We should never turn the sermon into a counseling session for one individual. Personal counseling should be done privately. Some preachers say things they are afraid to say to face-to-face as they stand courageously behind the pulpit. This is wrong. One of my seminary professors used to speak of men becoming bold when they "put on their wooden pants." Rather, Jesus tells us to come out from behind our wooden pulpits and discuss a brother's sin in private (Matthew 18.15).

As the host of the banquet, my duty is to spread enough dishes that there will be something for everyone to enjoy. We have no way of knowing exactly who will be present; therefore, we must be prepared for everyone. We preach to a cross-section of society -- young and old, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, happy and sad, saint and sinner, and everyone in between. To the intellectual you must show the academic integrity of the gospel, but you must do so in a way that makes clear that it is God, not you, who has all the answers. To the unlearned you must show the simplicity of the gospel, without presenting a distorted message. Someone has said, "Our message must comfort the disturbed, and disturb the comfortable." Those who need the hope of Jesus must be comforted. Those who trust in themselves must be convicted. Jesus receives the humble and rebukes the haughty. So make a big banquet, because you never know who is coming!

Make It Fit -- The Application

A sermon should challenge people to respond. As people listen to your message, you want them to leave with a new resolve to change. Perhaps the change will be in thoughts and

attitudes of bitterness and pride. Sometimes our challenge will call people to break bad habits and addictions that torment their souls. Other times we will call people to replace words of abuse and offensive with blessing. There are many ways we need to bring our lives into conformity with God's holiness. Our sermon must lift up His standard and specifically instruct people how to obey Him by grace.

Remember that the application we make should be dug out of our sermon text. Often, this is a difficult procedure. There are so many areas where the concerned Pastor wants to correct and instruct his congregation. He may think, "Why can't the sermon text just say what my people need to hear?" The answer is, it does! The question is, are you willing to do the work? This requires that we think deeply about the text, and the lives of our members. Of course we do not know exactly who will come and listen, but we do know many general characteristics of the lives of our people.

One Sunday I was asked to speak in a Kazakh church. It was Naurez, the Central Asian New Year's celebration. Naurez also marks the beginning of spring. Traditionally, people right any wrongs they may have with friends or family on this day. It is also a day to make resolutions to improve their lives in the year ahead. This day has deep meaning for many in Kazakhstan, so I sought the Lord for an appropriate preaching text. I had several factors to consider. At that point the Kazakh Bible had not been completed, so I wanted to use a text that was in their Scriptures. I knew that particular church had a number of young people and children who attended the sermon, so I wanted to pick a "story" text. Also, I knew my translator (I cannot speak Kazakh) was not yet able to easily translate complex concepts, so I wanted to keep it fairly simple. (This is a good rule in any language.) I decided to preach about the Lord Jesus and Zacchaeus, from Luke 19.

I tried to make my applications from Luke relevant to my listeners that Naurez Day. I described Zacchaeus' "childlike" behavior of running down the streets of Jericho and climbing a tree, an evidence of his great curiosity about Jesus (19.4). My listeners laughed aloud at the idea of their city Mayor behaving like this. Such behavior was shocking -- then and now. I pointed them to where Jesus said that being "like a child" is necessary for entering His Kingdom (Luke 18.17). How much are we willing to risk our reputations for Jesus? Is it more important how He will "see us," or how others see us?

Zacchaeus' pledge to repay those he had stolen from was very similar to the Naurez custom of making things right (19.8). But the motive behind the payment is very important. We cannot be made right with God through our payment. Jesus has already paid the penalty for sin. Our payment of restitution should be the fruit of our repentance, the response of faith. Any congregation will include people with the sin of Zacchaeus – financial mismanagement of some kind. Whether we speak to children who have stolen from their mother's purse, employees who steal from their workplace, or upper-level business corruption like that of Zacchaeus, we are all guilty. In the eyes of God, our financial life is directly connected to our spiritual life. We earn our punishment for sin like wages, and we receive salvation as a gift (Romans 6.23).

I also mentioned the criticism of the crowd in Jericho, they did not approve of Jesus going to the home of a notorious sinner like Zacchaeus (19.7). Jesus shows us that doing the right thing is not always popular. He is an example of standing for the truth of God – no matter what. Eventually the crowd that was opposed to Jesus shouted for His death. Kazakhs

face great pressure from family and friends when they follow Jesus today. Jesus is our example of how to ignore the voices calling us to turn away from the true way of God. This portion of Scripture describes a "Naurez" experience for Zacchaeus with Jesus –a new beginning that lasts for eternity.

Notice that my applications were made throughout the sermon. Each sub-point included a call for the listeners to apply the Word to their lives. I did not have a long list of applications at the end of the message. This is because the true interpretation of the text includes its application to people's lives. The interpreter asks two questions of the text: What did it mean to the original readers, and what does it mean to us today? Our sermon does not have the proper interpretation if we do not answer both questions. Throughout the entire sermon, we must preach so that our listeners will understand and obey the text.

The applications we make need to be specific. As we do so, we must go only as far as the Scripture goes, and no further. I preached about the repayment Zacchaeus made to those from whom he had stolen. Then I applied his example to our lives. He pledged to repay people four times what he had stolen, this was probably based on Old Testament law (Exodus 22.1-15). I did not preach that my listeners must use the same percentage of repayment. I left it for the Holy Spirit to work out the exact figures in their hearts. Perhaps He will impress the listeners to repay a person ten times the amount they may have stolen. Our duty is not to calculate the damages, but to call for a decision to make things right in the eyes of God and man. Another example of going beyond Scripture would be to tell our listeners which specific political candidate to vote for in an election, if their government allows them a choice. We should urge believers to be involved in the political process, to promote the principles of Scripture in the society, and to be a witness of Jesus in the political world. But exactly how they express their Christian witness in this area is a matter of their conscience before God. Another example is that we must tell our people that God wants them to provide for the financial needs of their family as best they are able. But Scripture does not provide exact details on how people are to find a job, or what kind of job to seek. Most often, Scripture gives principles, not particulars, and so should our sermons. However, as believers we are to apply the principles to specific situations of home, school, work, and other areas of life. We must speak where Scripture speaks, and remain silent where Scripture is silent. We can be confident that the Holy Spirit will make many specific applications as we preach the Word faithfully and prayerfully. It is interesting that Jesus did not mention money to Zacchaeus. Without Jesus mentioning the subject, Zacchaeus was so convicted by this encounter that he publicly repented of stealing.

To make our applications more specific than Scripture is to preach "law" and not "grace." Our sermon is not to become a list of "do's and don'ts." Salvation is a free gift from God; we cannot earn it, and we do not deserve it. We must strive to maintain the balance of biblical truth; it is by His mercy that we know God – and those who have received mercy must obey. Jesus invited Himself to the home of Zacchaeus before he pledged to repay those he had wronged – Jesus began their relationship. "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4.19).

Here Is Where We Begin

This chapter has sought to answer the question, "Where Do We Begin?" Summarizing our answer, we need:

- God
- a specific portion of His Word
- a theme expressing the meaning of that Scripture portion
- applications which all your people need to hear from the text

Once you have these four vital things, you are ready to continue your preparation. If you do not have them yet, keep on seeking the Lord. Jesus said, "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life." Peter was convinced and told Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6.63, 68).

7. How Can I Put my Thoughts Together? - Outlines and Notes

One of our family treasures from our years of ministry in Africa is our “batiks.” Batik artists color their cloth drawings by dipping them into bright liquid dyes. The result is a colorful picture depicting the richness of life in Africa. We were surprised when we took our batiks to be framed; a good frame costs as much as the batik itself. After spending the money for a frame, we were in for another surprise -- we hardly noticed the frame! It had been made in such a way that it called attention to our batik, not to itself. Yet, because of this frame, we can better appreciate and enjoy our beautiful work of African art.

This chapter discusses sermon outlines, they “frame” and “display” our Scripture text. Our outline should be a barely-visible support to the text. It should not call attention to itself, but to the Word of God. A good outline is also costly, it requires hours of careful and detailed study of Scripture. A good sermon outline helps listeners focus their attention on God’s message. In fact, people will notice the outline most when it is not there, because then the sermon will lack form and direction. A sermon outline is truly good when all praise goes to God and the “very great and precious promises” of His Word (2 Peter 1.4).

It usually takes me several hours of detailed study to create a sermon outline. Charles Simeon (1759-1836), a famous English preacher, preached thousands of sermons during his long ministry in Cambridge. He is still known today for his exceptional sermon outlines. He once spoke of outlining as “striking the rock of God’s Word with a silver hammer so it’s meaning opens up to us in pieces.” You will find that during some weeks of sermon preparation, the “silver hammer” cannot be easily found! It can be a great struggle to find the “pieces” or main points of your sermon text. Though it is often a long struggle of study and prayer, once I have my sermon outline, the rest of my work of preparation becomes easier. There are still hours of work ahead, but my preparation becomes more focused. With my outline finished, I know more clearly where I am going during the remaining task of sermon preparation.

Tests of a Good Sermon Outline

- UNITY

A sermon should have one main point. Some preachers call this “The Big Idea.” This point should be clearly stated early in the presentation of the sermon, because it is your purpose statement. This idea should be short, simple, and memorable. The sub-points of the message should be in harmony with the one main idea. The points of the outline should develop and support this one main point. One sermon I preached on marriage, was entitled, “Real Men Love their Wives.” The title itself was my purpose statement. This was my outline:

“Real Men Love their Wives” - Ephesians 5.25-29

1. A Sacrificial Love - v. 25 *“gave himself up for her”*
2. A Sanctifying Love - v. 26,27 *“to make her holy”*
3. A Satisfying Love - v. 28,29 *“he who loves his wife loves himself”*

You can see that each of the three points explains and expands my main theme. This sermon is not about three different ideas, but one “Big Idea” – the love a husband must have for his wife.

- PROGRESSION

The sermon outline should have movement. Each point should lift the understanding of the listener to a new level. A good message moves toward a climax. This progression is seen in an outline I used in a sermon on 1 Thessalonians 1 entitled “The Growth of God’s Gospel.” My purpose statement was, “The living Word of God must grow through us to others.” My outline was:

“The Growth of God’s Gospel” - 1 Thessalonians 1

1. The Gospel to Us - vs. 4,5 *“our gospel came to you”*
2. The Gospel in Us - vs. 6,7 *“you became imitators...you became a model”*
3. The Gospel through Us - vs. 8-10 *“the Lord’s message rang out from you”*

We have all felt the uncertainty of going somewhere for the first time. It often seems like a very long time before we reach our destination. While we are traveling, we wonder where we are. When we preach, our listeners can feel like they are being taken on such an unknown journey. When we travel to a new place, it is reassuring to see some signposts along the road. It is comforting to know how many kilometers remain until we reach our destination. In a similar way, the preacher should inform his listeners where they are on the “journey” of his message. Your outline will help take away their uncertainty. One pastor said, “I tell them what I plan to tell them, then I tell them, then I remind them what I said.” It is helpful to state our general plan at the beginning of the message. For example, “This morning I have three points to share about spiritual gifts.” The listener begins to feel confident that the preacher knows where he is going. They will relax and allow themselves to be taken on this adventure. Then as you move through the sermon and finally say, “My third point is...”, the listener begins to feel anticipation --“We’re almost home!” We preachers are deceived if we think that people want to hear us talk all day long -- especially if we do not know where we are going. They have come to hear God’s Word, to know its meaning for their lives, and to go out and continue their walk with Him. Our listeners will be more relaxed to journey with us into the Scriptures when they see the progress of our outlines.

- MEMORABLE

Like the good frame that draws attention to the art, so the good sermon outline exalts God’s Word. Yet, like the frame, the good outline is not invisible. It helps us to remember the truth of Scripture, in part by remembering the outline itself. As we preach to people we want them to gain a memorable and useful knowledge of Scripture. With sixty-six different books in the Bible, the believer needs some memory tools to grasp the key concepts of God’s truth.

The wise preacher uses different techniques to help people remember God’s message. One common method is for each word of the outline to begin with same letter of the alphabet. Sometimes this can be done in a natural and helpful way. (The dictionary is a great tool for finding the right word.) Yet, remember that our goal in preaching is to faithfully communicate the truth of Scripture, not to display our cleverness in selecting words. We must never distort the truth of God simply so that our outline can all begin with words of the same letter. Another memory device is to carefully phrase our outline in words that rhyme, or end with the

same phrase or part of speech. The reason for such techniques is to help our hearers remember the message and meaning of God's word. The preacher's joy is for his listeners to say to God, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you"(Psalm 119.11).

Here is an outline that can help people remember important truths about God and His Word. The sermon is about worship. The worship of God is the most important part of the believer's life. Yet, Scripture teaches that not all worship is pleasing to God. Many sincere religious people think they are pleasing God with their worship. But God speaks about some worshippers, saying, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men" (Matthew 15.8,9). So as a Pastor I preached a sermon to help people know how to worship properly:

"Worship which God Desires" - John 4.21-24

1. To the Father - "*worship the Father*" vs. 21,23
2. By the Spirit - "*God is Spirit...in spirit*" v. 24
3. Through the Son - *Jesus is "the truth"* vs. 23,24

My goal was not that people would remember my clever outline, but to inform and increase their worship of God. Knowing that true worship is so important, I hoped the phrasing of my outline would give them three essential reminders. It will be my great joy if through my sermon they will bring greater glory to the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. What an awesome privilege to preach His Word!

- DIVERSITY

Each new point of the sermon outline must make a new contribution to the listener's understanding of the text. If you do not have a separate truth to teach and explain, it is not necessary to make a new sub-point in the outline. I once preached a sermon from Psalm 150. The statement of my theme was, "God commands us to praise Him." In order to better understand this important truth, I phrased the sub-points of the outline as questions:

"God Commands us to Praise Him" - Psalm 150

1. Where Should God be Praised? - v. 1 *in the church and in the world*
2. Why Should God be Praised? - v. 2 *for His person and His work*
3. How Should God be Praised? - vs. 3 - 5 *in all ways and all things*
4. Who Should Praise God? - v. 6 *everyone and everything!*

- BALANCE

Earlier I said that the preacher must keep his promises about his intentions in the sermon. If the sermon is introduced as a message on all of Ephesians Chapter 1, then he is responsible to have an outline that takes all 23 verses of the chapter into consideration. If he really intends to preach only one verse, then the outline should explain just that one verse. As you compare your outline with your sermon text, it should reflect a balanced presentation of the entire passage. If you realize that more detailed teaching is needed from a particular passage, then you may plan several sermons from that text. People will learn more when you present various truths in several sermons, instead of trying to fit every idea into one sermon.

When I preached through Paul's letter to the Ephesians I found it difficult to control my excitement! Paul, inspired by the Spirit, fills this letter with many wonderful truths about God and His grace! My first sermon was taken from just the first two verses of the first chapter as an introduction to the series. In this sermon I looked back to what Luke records about Paul's ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19 and 20), as a background for our understanding. (Several New Testament letters can be better understood by reading the portions of Acts which describe what happened in such cities as Ephesus, Corinth, Thessalonica, and Philippi.)

My second sermon in this series on Ephesians was from 1.3-14. Here I wanted to preach a message to explain and apply the work of the Triune God in our salvation. My title and theme was "Praise Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." After this sermon I went back and preached four more sermons from these same eleven verses (1.3-14), going deeper into the important truths they teach. Paul packs many important truths into each verse of Scripture. Each verse has several powerful theological words and concepts needing further explanation. The four other sermons I preached from Ephesians 1.3-14 were:

- 1) All of God's blessings for us are "in Christ" - v. 3
- 2) The work of God the Father in our salvation: *election and adoption* - vs. 3-6
- 3) The work of God the Son in our salvation: *redemption and restoration* - vs. 7-12
- 4) The work of God the Spirit in our salvation: *sealed and guaranteed* - vs. 13,14

These eleven verses are so filled with vital truth I wanted to preach five separate sermons to help people understand and apply them. I also know my five poor sermons did not exhaust the deep eternal truths contained in these verses. Perhaps a better preacher would say everything necessary in just one sermon.

Although I preached several sermons from these verses, I was careful to make the first sermon an overview of the entire section of Ephesians 1.3-14. This is because Paul takes special care that his listeners understand that the Trinity – one God revealed in the three persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – cannot be divided. In fact, these eleven verses were one long sentence of praise in the original language. Paul teaches that God works in perfect harmony in all things -- especially our salvation. So before I gave separate messages about each member of the Trinity, I wanted our church to see God in His triune fullness as our Savior. The outline for this sermon was as follows:

"Praise Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" - Ephesians 1.3-14

Praise the Father, the Architect of our Salvation - vs. 3-6

Praise the Son, who has Accomplished our Salvation - vs. 7-12

Praise the Spirit, who Applies our Salvation - vs. 13,14

- CONTEMPORARY

Only God's Word is timeless and eternal -- our sermons are time-bound and limited. Each new generation of preachers must open, explain, and apply God's Word to their society. As you recall, the preacher is the "bridge-builder" who links Scripture's ancient truth to the heart of modern man. He is called to speak to the "here and now" of the present situation.

Therefore, our sermon outlines should be contemporary expressions of God's truth. Our wording of God's timeless message should sound like the headlines of today's newspaper.

In 1 Corinthians 14 the Apostle Paul provides us with a glimpse of a church gathered for worship many years ago. Several important teachings about worship can be learned from a study of his words. Apparently it was common for unbelievers to attend church services then. In these verses Paul answers a question about "speaking in tongues." His words have an important application to today's preacher of God's timeless truth.

"So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everyone is prophesying (*Blair's note: "prophesying" is to communicate God's truth in an understandable language*), he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!" (1 Corinthians 14.23-25)

It would be wonderful to have our sermons interrupted by people falling down in confession of repentance and faith! Too often only believers hear our messages. May God bring both the saved and unsaved! But if unbelievers come, do they leave confused? Do they think Jesus is only an ancient hero from the dusty pages of history? Do they think our faith is a ritual for elderly grandmothers? Or do our listeners hear God speaking "their language"? It requires great care to phrase our preaching in contemporary language. To do this you must use an accurate translation of the Bible into the modern language of your hearers. Some Christians have a stubborn loyalty to very old Bible translations that speak in archaic poetry. God's intention is that His voice be heard, understood, and obeyed by each new generation.

I hesitate to provide an example of a "contemporary" sermon outline because each person's thoughts are a product of their own passing generation. Yet, here is an outline I used to preach a simple sermon on some challenging words of Jesus in His "Sermon on the Mount." Jesus' words are beautiful, simple, and memorable, but sometimes we read them as mere sentimental slogans. We must strive to understand their strong, life-shattering, impact. We cannot remain "neutral" -- either we are for Him or against Him. Our response to His challenge will have eternal consequences. This outline tries to capture the seriousness of our choice:

"Two Masters" - Matthew 6.19-34

1. Two Concerns of Jesus
 - a. for those who "have" - vs. 25,27
 - b. for those who "do not have" - v. 32
2. Two Choices suggested by Jesus

four examples:

 - a. of our Heart - "Treasures" - vs. 19-21
 - b. of our Mind - "light/darkness" - vs. 22,23
 - c. of our Will - "masters" - v. 24
 - d. of our Lifestyle - "creation" - vs. 26-32
3. Two Cures from Jesus
 - a. our belief - vs. 25-30
 - b. our behavior - vs. 31-34

- RELEVANT

The sermon is not a mere restatement of Biblical truth, but an explanation and application of the truth. Our outline should show that what happened to the Bible characters are examples for us. Speaking of the disobedience of the Old Testament people, Paul wrote, “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10.11). He also wrote, “Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15.4). So our preaching from the Scriptures must have this tone of relevance to our hearers today. There is a significant difference between a sermon and a lecture about the Bible. As you can see below:

LECTURE	SERMON
Focus on the Past <i>then and there</i>	Focus on the Present <i>here and now</i>
Focus on Other People <i>“they” and “them”</i>	Focus on Ourselves <i>“we” and “you”</i>
Abstract Theory <i>what happened to the Israelites</i>	Concrete Ideas <i>what is happening with us</i>
Application to the hearers <i>few, general, not essential</i>	Application to the hearers <i>many, specific, very essential</i>
Intended to Inform <i>“this is what happened...”</i>	Intended to Persuade and Challenge <i>“because of this, you must...”</i>

Since a sermon is different from a lecture, our preaching must be living and meaningful to our listeners today.

In Acts chapters 3 and 4, Luke records a healing of a crippled man, a sermon by the Apostle Peter, and the angry reaction of the Jewish leaders. Let me show you an example of how NOT to outline this passage in a sermon for today.

1. Peter Heals Man - 3.1-10
2. Peter Preaches Sermon - 3.11-26
3. Leaders Get Angry - 4.1-22

This outline does provide an accurate statement of the events of the chapter. Yet, the listener may rightly ask the question, “So what? What does that ancient story have to do with me?” The outline above is NOT relevant to our hearers today.

- GOD-CENTERED

The outline above has two mistakes; it is not relevant and it is “man-centered.” The Bible is a message primarily about God, and biblical sermons should be “God-centered.” Peter and John were instruments of healing in Acts 3, but God is the only healer. Our sermon should

focus on the Lord, because He is present with us today in power. We want our hearers to enter into a living relationship with the God of Peter and John, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Consider again the passage from Acts 3 and 4. This outline is more relevant and God-centered:

“Serving the Exalted Jesus” - Acts 3.1 - 4.22

1. God’s Power to Meet our Needs - 3.1-10
2. God’s Word to Answer our Questions - 3.11-26
3. God’s Courage to Confront our Enemies - 4.1-22

This new outline helps people encounter the living God through His Word. Each point emphasizes what the Exalted Jesus can do in and through us now.

Instead of preaching “Peter Heals Man,” we should say “God’s Power to meet our Needs.” Not many of our hearers will be physically crippled, as the man in Acts 3 was, but all of us have many needs – physical, spiritual, emotional, financial, and relational. The power of the living God that once healed the man can meet our needs today.

I replaced the words “Peter Preaches Sermon,” with the statement “God’s Word to Answer our Questions.” This is because the questions from the crowd in the Temple faced by Peter and John may be different from questions we now face. But our source book of answers is the same – God’s unchanging Word.

The explanation “Leaders Get Angry,” was replaced by “God’s Courage to Confront our Enemies.” The Jewish Council of Jerusalem may never arrest us. But we will be persecuted for our faith in some way -- perhaps arrested, imprisoned, or worse. We can find our courage in knowing that the Mighty God who stood with His servants then also stands with us now! Because of Jesus we have God’s courage to confront our enemies. This God-centered outline will speak more directly to the hearts of your listeners today.

The Sub-Points of the Outline

You probably noticed that the sermon outline above entitled “Two Masters” included several sub-points under the main points. These sub-points each began with the small letters, “a”, “b”, “c”, etc. A good sermon outline should include such sub-points. Their purpose is to deepen the listener’s understanding of the sermon text and strengthen your applications in preaching. Developing these sub-points requires careful and detailed study of the Scriptures. Having such detailed notes helps us to preach well-reasoned truths drawn out from the Scripture. The preacher without sub-points tends to talk without precision and direction. A message built only on three main points means he must “fill in the time” between the points with words of his own invention. The preacher with sub-points in his outline has made a more detailed map of the specific Biblical truths contained within his text. The use of sub-points forces the preacher to keep closer to the Scripture. If he follows his detailed outline, he is not as likely to wander into his own imaginative words and ideas. He is more likely to be a faithful preacher of Scripture.

Let us look again at the passage in Acts 3 to see how we might develop our sub-points. The first main point of that outline is; “God’s Power to Meet our Needs.” As we look closely at Acts 3, we see at least three details about that demonstration of God’s power in the healing, it is:

- a. Greater than the world’s medicine - 3.2 *“crippled from birth”*
- b. Greater than the world’s money - 3.6 *“no silver and gold”*
- c. Greater than the world’s understanding - 3.10 *“amazement”*

A Little Bit of Preaching....

Here is an example of how I might preach my sermon using these three sub-points:

- a. Greater than the world’s medicine - 3.2 *“crippled from birth”*

No doubt this man’s parents had done all they could to seek help and healing for their crippled son. They did not have the sophisticated medical advances we have today. But there were doctors and healers of various kinds who would have been consulted for his well being. As an adult, this man probably also tried many methods to heal his affliction. But none were able to do what Jesus did --more than just walking, he was now walking, and leaping, and praising God.

Today’s medical care is far more sophisticated and successful than in the first century. But are we mindful that God is still the only healer? He may not choose to bless medicine for our healing. In Africa I once gulped down a couple of aspirin, desperately seeking relief from a malaria headache. A Korean missionary nurse we worked with saw me and asked, “Do you pray before you take aspirin?” Great question. Do I believe my healing comes from God or man?

To be “crippled from birth,” meant that this man probably lived with a great sense of hopelessness. Spending an entire lifetime watching others around him walk and run must have intensified his despair. It would be insensitive for us to say that we, “know how he felt,” for no man can really feel the pain of another. But there is one Man who truly felt the pain of this crippled man. The people gathered in the Temple courts knew these words of Messianic hope spoken by Isaiah 700 years earlier, “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53.4,5). This crippled man lived to see these words fulfilled. They promise Jesus the Nazarene who died on the cross for him, and for all who believe. When Peter preached, God’s healing forgiveness was given to this man by the power of the Holy Spirit. This great salvation is applied to people today when His servants speak His word of healing, forgiveness, and new life to our sinful hearts. We who believe are to be messengers of this hope in Jesus. His servant Paul speaks life and hope to Christ’s followers: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15.13).

- b. Greater than the world’s money - 3.6 *“no silver and gold”*

No doubt all the man's efforts to seek healing cost money -- it still does today. There are some who think that money can buy anything. But when they get very sick, they realize that even money cannot make them well. Peter and John had no money, but they were instruments of the God who has everything. God's healing power, like His saving power, is free. Praise Him that he is so gracious to sick and sinful men! Jesus came and preached "good news to the poor" (Luke 4.18). So should we.

This event, like all the healings recorded in Scripture, was spontaneous and complete. Unlike modern healers of today, the Apostles did not announce a healing service for some future date. They simply spoke the healing word and God's power immediately restored the man. Those who schedule a healing service today schedule out the power of God; Biblical healing was always spontaneous, never scheduled. The Living Lord heals today. It is not a matter of our faith or plan. We do not know His sovereign will. Ultimate healing will be when we see Him face to face.

c. Greater than the world's understanding - 3.10 *"amazement"*

We can feel the hush and awe which must have gripped the crowd of witnesses in the Temple. The heavy sense of the glory of God was upon them. They knew this crippled man; some may have known him from his birth. They all knew he was completely disabled. But they could see for themselves that he now walked, indeed he jumps in celebration of joy! "Jesus Christ of Nazareth!" -- this name was credited for the healing. They had heard the name "Jesus of Nazareth" many times in the preceding months. Perhaps they had recently seen his bloody figure carrying a cross through their streets. Some wondered, "What could that man have to do with this miracle? Isn't He dead? How could He be the Christ?" In "wonder and amazement" this crowd tried to piece these facts together. "Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" (Romans 11.33).

Modern man thinks he has an answer for just about everything. What ancients once considered a unique "act of God" modern man can now produce in a laboratory. But even in this age, His awesome and incomparable power breaks into our lives. Mighty earthquakes shake our tall skyscrapers; colorful rainbows still decorate our polluted skies; a fond kiss from a child can bring tears to the eyes of the most cynical heart - in these ways God breaks through our pride and independence. He is still powerful enough take our breath away with the tap of His "little finger" to our chest. Man has advanced in many areas, but he is not God yet, nor will he ever be. "I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene!" Amen!

A Sermon Analysis

This is an example of how I might preach from the text in Acts 3. Notice that my outline was present, but it was not dominant. It served to uplift the Scripture and its explanation and application. Our outline should be like the band of the ring, which holds and highlights a precious stone. When a man gives a woman a diamond, most of the time it is resting in a ring setting. Her praise is for the precious stone -- no matter its size! -- not the band that displays it. Yet, without the band she would not be able to "show off" the stone to her friends! Likewise a good outline can help us lift high the Lord and His Word.

Notice also that I moved back and forth across "the bridge." I tried to explain the setting of the Biblical event in the Temple courts of Jerusalem and the feelings of the crowd. I

also tried to imagine how these Biblical truths apply to modern man. I spoke about both today and the days of the Bible. I tried to be careful and clear about which period of time I spoke. Once your listeners understand that you are making comments about two periods of time, they will usually be able to keep them straight in their minds. People who listen to your preaching regularly will learn that this is your method, and they will soon understand and follow it. They will even realize that they must use such a “bridge” in their own study and application of their Bible reading.

I also give some examples of how to illustrate and apply the text. Some of my illustrations were just explanations – with some Biblical imagination – of the setting of the text. I made comments about the Temple court, the “mood” in Jerusalem around the time of Jesus’ crucifixion, and even the parents of the crippled man. I am saying more than the text tells us, but I do not think I contradict anything in Scripture. My hope is that I can help the listener to better understand the Scripture. I include a personal example of my “aspirin taking” – which is something that nearly all listeners have experienced. I also encouraged believers to be messengers of God’s hope in Jesus. You will notice that the applications were given throughout the message; I did not list them all at the end. This is because the text is best understood when it is applied and obeyed.

Other Scripture References

Because we believe that “Scripture interprets Scripture” it is good to refer to other passages as you preach from your text. In my sermon example, I quoted Isaiah, Luke, and Paul. This is a good teaching method. Use of other references helps our listeners to better understand other parts of the Bible and to appreciate the thematic connections of the Scriptures. But we must be careful how we do this.

We must be sure that there is a true connection between the verses. Does the meaning of the reference verse, as it was spoken to its “original audience,” have the same essential meaning as your primary text? To answer this question, you must study the context and meaning of each passage. Just because the same word is used in two passages, it does not always have the same meaning. I might tell my wife I “love” her and then say that I just “love” my secretary. If I mean the same thing each time I use the word “love” I will be in trouble with my wife, and with God! Word meanings are determined by knowing the context of their usage. If a verse does not speak to the same issue of your sermon text, it would not be an appropriate reference.

Here is my defense for choosing my supporting Scripture references from the words of Isaiah, Luke, and Paul. Isaiah’s promise of the Messiah as Savior and healer was very fitting to the text in Acts 3. Jesus came “for the Jew first” (Romans 1.16). People in the Temple on that day were familiar with, and expectantly anticipating, their Messianic hope. I could also apply Isaiah’s promise to us Gentiles today because He is also the “Savior of the world” (John 4.42). I made reference to Jesus intention to preach to the poor in Luke (4.18) because it is also our mandate as we serve in His name. We know this because He sent out His disciples saying, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20.21). Paul’s words of hope in Romans 15 are fitting both for the man and us today, because God says of Himself, “I the Lord do not change” (Malachi 3.6). When Paul calls Him, “the God of Hope,” this is a strong statement of His eternal nature, not just a passing activity. If He was once the “God of Hope,”

He is forever the “God of Hope.” So I tried to stand on solid Biblical ground in my selection of supporting Scripture references.

We must also take care in how we actually make reference to other passages. The most common method is to actually turn to the passage in the course of preaching. Often the preacher will ask listeners to turn in their own Bibles. Be careful here. I have a theory that every time you turn to a passage of Scripture you lose a certain percentage of your listeners. We all know that many people come to church without a Bible – shame on them! Some who do bring their Bibles do not know how to find what is inside. When you excitedly tell the church to turn and look at a wonderful verse from Zephaniah, you will hear the pages of many Bibles turning, and turning, and turning, and turning. Long after you actually read the text, there will still be some people turning their pages and trying to find the place. Then when you go from Zephaniah to Leviticus over to Philemon and climax with a great verse from Ezra, you will hear a lot of pages turning! Soon people will get tired of turning -- even worse, they will get tired of listening. Remember that people can sleep with their eyes open. You would be surprised how many churchgoers can do it. This is what they will do when the sermon becomes a confusion of turning Bible pages, looking for hard-to-find passages. So here is what I suggest about other references.

Generally I think it is best not to ask people to turn away from your preaching text. If they have found it and are following along as you preach, you have a good thing going - keep going! I have two criteria for asking people to turn to a cross-reference during the preaching; 1) the reference is essential to establish an extremely important point in the sermon, and 2) the cross-referenced passage is long or somewhat complex. Some extremely important points can be clearly understood without looking up the text. The good preacher can tell people that “God is love” – an amazing and profound truth – without forcing the congregation to turn in their Bibles to 1 John 4.8. Generally, I do not turn away from my preaching text more than twice during my sermon. In fact, most of the time I never turn away from my preaching passage. (There will probably be some eager listeners who struggle to look up every verse you cite – God bless their zeal!) But I still use other passages to explain and apply my preaching text. Sometimes I use as many as twenty other passages. Most of the time I write out the entire reference verse in my notes. Sometimes I can preach the verse from memory. Sometimes I have prepared listeners in advance with note cards of the Scripture references and asked them to be ready to read a passage. I do not always read the entire verse, usually just the key phrase that speaks to my point. Occasionally, I cite the exact reference of a passage; especially when the hearers should note the passage to look up later. But most of the time I do not cite the exact references. It can become quite tiring to listen to a speaker cite a long list of numbers, “chapter 7, verse 8, chapter 12, verse 2, chapter 9, verse 36...no wait, that is not verse 36, it is verse 37, no it is verse 38...” You understand my point. The same Bible that brings light in our preaching can hinder our understanding if we do not use it carefully. There are many distractions that steal away the attention of your listeners; do not make your own use of the Bible one of those thieves.

Outlines, Manuscripts, Notes

As I begin to prepare my sermon, I make numerous rough notes and possible outlines. Gradually all my “chicken scratch” begins to take form into a working theme and outline. In my first years of preaching I completed this process by writing out the full text of my sermon as a manuscript. I wrote out the entire sermon, from the opening words to the final “Amen.” I

still have some of them on file, and whenever I read them, I smile. They'll probably never find their way into a published volume, like I sometimes vainly dreamed! But they encourage me that God is faithfully working in me and refining my preaching skills over the years. There were several advantages to writing out this full manuscript. It was very helpful to know what comes next in the presentation. It is possible to have a couple good ideas you want to preach. But with no plan you may find yourself standing before the church wondering how to get from one point to the next. The message may seem good in your head, but the words do not come out right! So a written manuscript helped me to make smooth transitions from one point to the next. Also, the manuscript allowed me to see whether I was making my points clear. One remark I sometimes hear about my preaching is that is easy to understand. I think the hours spent writing out my thoughts, trying to select each word carefully, have been invaluable.

I do not actually use the full manuscript when I preach. One friend told me his experience of preaching on a hot summer day. A strong wind blew through an open window and scattered the pages of his sermon manuscript all over the meeting hall. So be careful if you have too many pages of notes when you preach! The reason I do not use a full manuscript for the actual preaching is that I find it limits my "eye-contact" with my listeners. I become confused trying to find my place among the many words of my full notes. My observation is that preachers with too many notes tend to look at them too much, even when they know their material well. Their notes become a distraction instead of a useful tool. I have known some preachers who can effectively read a full manuscript of their sermon and maintain good eye contact with their listeners -- but it is a rare gift.

But I do use notes. I actually use a kind of "expanded" outline of my message when I preach. I have the outline written in bold print, often highlighted with a colored marking pen. I also write out any Scripture references or quotations I plan to share. I may think that I have memorized a Bible verse, but sometimes when I stand up to preach I have forgotten it! I believe if I am quoting the words of another, I should be careful to quote their words accurately, so I write them out in full. On a good day of preaching, when I know the message in my head and heart, I may never even look down at my notes. Yet, I have my notes ready. We do not always know when those "good days" will come!

One day was so good I preached two sermons together. Early in my ministry I was asked by a nearby church to preach a missions sermon during their evening service. All that week I anguished over which of my two "great" missions sermons I should preach. In fact I did not make that decision until I entered the pulpit. I had the notes for both sermons in my Bible. To my surprise, it took just ten minutes to preach the sermon -- at least that was what the clock near the door indicated. Not a problem; I had the notes for the other sermon handy. So I began to preach the second "great" missions sermon in my collection. I thought it was odd that my wife was making so many strange faces during such a great message. At the end of the service the pastor and I walked down the center aisle toward the door. I realized that the glare on the clock caused me to see it incorrectly, and what I saw was not good. My two great messages had taken over one hour to preach!

Our Plan and God's Plan

Pray that as you preach, the Lord will help you to say what He wants. What comes out of my mouth in my preaching is never exactly like I have written in my notes. Sometimes I

say things I had never planned. Other times I leave out some of what I had planned to say. From the very beginning of the preparation, I pray for the Lord's guidance and blessing. I work hard at understanding, explaining, and applying God's Word, I make my notes, and I preach. I give my preparation, my presentation, and myself to Him. It never turns out exactly like I had planned, but I trust it is according to His perfect plan.

Paul describes his ministry of the Word as a planter and a builder. He and Apollos were "God's fellow workers" (1 Corinthians 3.9). One plants Bible seeds, one waters with tearful prayers, each one gives their contribution of spiritual building material from the Lord. The field belongs to the Lord of the Harvest, and he lays the foundation as the Master Builder. He kindly uses us, but He gets the glory, because He does the real work -- "God made it grow" (v. 6).

You may say, "Well then why should I prepare my sermons? Why not just get up and talk spontaneously?" This would be like building with "wood, hay, or straw" (v. 12). These materials are very easy to find. But such poor materials will be burned in God's judgment fire and such poor builders will lose their reward (vs. 13-15). "Gold, silver and precious stones" are costly and very hard to find. We are commanded to study and prepare well for our preaching; failing to be prepared is sin and shame before God (2 Timothy 2.15). In the mystery of His sovereign plan God uses us; our personality, experiences, knowledge, and preparation as messengers of His Word. It is an amazing privilege to be "fellow workers with God" in this spiritual building and planting. May God help you to prepare His message well, knowing that "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2.10).

8. How Can I Get People's Attention? - The Introduction

The television remote control has transformed people's minds. Many of our listener's are increasingly impatient and intolerant. When a program they do not like comes on their TV, they can just push a button and it is gone. No longer do they have to climb out of their chairs and walk across the room to turn the dial on their machines. No longer do they patiently wait a few minutes, giving the program a chance to prove itself worthy of their attention; in just a few seconds the verdict is made, and they switch to a preferred alternative – all while they remain seated in comfort. As I preached in America - where nearly all the population has television sets - I sometimes felt like my hearers held their "remote control" devices in their hands. I had just a few seconds to convince them not to "switch me off" as I began.

This "device" is not just an American phenomenon; people in the most distant villages of the globe now hold their television remote control in their hands. The invention of television forced preachers to make their messages more interesting. The remote control now forces us to grab their attention early in the message – before we are "switched off." For this reason, the introduction of our sermons must be interesting and well prepared. The sermon will not just "begin by itself." Because I realize this, I devote the last part of my sermon preparation time to creating my introduction. After I know what I have planned for my sermon, I then consider "How can I get them to listen?"

The Purpose of a Sermon Introduction

- To Gain Attention - Most people will have some curiosity when we stand to speak. Perhaps they only want to examine our clothes, or study the way we comb our hair, but they will at least look our way as we begin. But how long will they keep looking? Will they soon become more interested in searching the contents of their handbag, or staring at the baby across the room, or reading other portions of Scripture, or day dreaming, or even taking a short nap? Your introduction will be a big part of the answer. Will there be something in this sermon to keep their attention, even through the distractions that normally come during any meeting? Listening with concentration is hard work. Is your sermon going to be worthy of the efforts? They will decide within a very few minutes. Remember too that you want people to be attracted to the message of your sermon -- not your mannerisms. Too often preachers do not take enough time to get "settled" before they begin preaching. Because of this, they are continuously arranging their notes and Bible, adjusting the microphone, straightening their necktie, pulling up their trousers, scratching their nose, and clearing their throat all throughout the sermon! Since you want the hearers' attention focused on your message, take a minute to do all your clearing, scratching, wiggling, pulling, and arranging before you start the preaching.
- To Create Positive Interest - For a number of years I have taught preaching courses. Such courses have always included opportunities for the students to preach. Some of their introductions have been memorable: "I am sorry that I had no time to study for this sermon... I forgot what Bible passage I was supposed to study...I really do not know anything about what I am saying.....but here is my sermon for today!" Such introductory comments certainly do gain attention, but not positive interest. When I heard such introductions, I became angry that these preachers had wasted opportunities, talents, and time – for themselves and everyone listening. There may be times when you really do

have nothing to say because of extreme circumstances. In such times you should invite another preacher, or have the church spend the “sermon time” in prayer and worship that day. If you gain a reputation for wasting people’s time, they will soon find somewhere better to spend their time -- and they should! May God give you a holy enthusiasm for Him and His Word that will be attractive to all who hear.

- **To Show Relevance** - People are wondering if you have anything meaningful and helpful for their lives. They are gathered in front of you with their worries, hopes, and fears. Show them that God’s living Word has a message for their situation. Are you aware of the wide audience of people who are listening - the elderly, students, unbelievers, men, women, and children? If your sermon is about marriage, what about the unmarried? What point of your message touches a common interest of everyone? What do the stories of Abraham, Moses, David, Paul – or even Jesus – have to do with the 21st Century person? You must know the answers to these questions, and be able to communicate them clearly, early in your message.
- **To Make your Intentions Known** - Where are you going to take your people today? What Scripture have you planned to open up to them? Be clear and realistic about your plans. Remember that during these early moments, they are considering whether to listen. They are more likely to do so when they know your plan - or “Big Idea” - which determines the direction of the rest of your message. This means that you must keep your promises and fulfill your plans. If you invite them to hear your answer to a particular question of life, you must be faithful to provide the answer in your sermon. Pastor Kwock, a Chinese preacher in Honolulu, Hawaii, once said, “A good sermon is like a rat’s tail, short and to the point.”

Materials to Use for Your Introductions

Where can the preacher find material to create a good introduction? Gaining people’s positive interest week after week, year after year, can be difficult. We need some tools to help us in the process of preparing our introductions.

- **Quotations** - Perhaps there is a finely crafted statement that communicates the heart of your message. This quote may come from classic literature, popular magazines, or even a song lyric. A well-known person, or even someone unknown, may have spoken the quote. You may or not agree with their statement -- the person may even be an enemy of the faith -- but their words provoke interest and may be an appropriate beginning. It will only be appropriate if the quote fits the theme of your sermon. As in all your sermon preparation, be wise and sensitive in your choice of material. Your purpose is to open up the meaning of a particular passage of Scripture and bring glory to God.

In a sermon on commitment to Jesus, I began with words spoken by a missionary named Jim Elliot. He and several colleagues were killed in 1956 by a group of South American Indians who they were trying to reach with God’s love. Because of his martyrdom, these words have great power and personal integrity. Elliot lived and died his words: *“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”*

- **Current Events** - What are people talking about? What significant event has happened that week? Was there unusual weather, natural disaster, economic turmoil, political change, or

a major sporting or cultural event? Sometimes the best place to start talking is the point where the people are already talking. Some people will be surprised that the preacher does not live in a secluded monastery -- he actually knows what is going on in their world! Can you show them some specific way that your portion of Scripture speaks to the current events of the day?

One Valentine's Day I was asked to speak at a church attended by many young people. My theme was the "love" between Jacob and Rachel. (Actually their romance is filled with more examples of what young people should NOT do, than what they should do.) I began my sermon asking, "Who knows what day it is today?" Several of them said, "Sunday!" Then I said I knew that. (They must have really thought I was ignorant!) But I continued asking, "What else is today known for?" When they realized I was asking about Valentine's Day, several looked surprised. This preacher was interested in romance. They were even more surprised that the Bible promotes happy and holy romance! THAT got their attention.

- **Questions** - Sometimes a provocative question will focus the listener's attention on your message. What you ask may evoke a desire to listen carefully to the sermon to find the answer. Some examples may be, "If God is good, then why do people suffer?" "How can prayer change anything God has already planned?" "Can you really trust the message of the Bible?" The world's search for meaning and direction is revealed clearly in the question Pontius Pilate asked Jesus: "What is truth?" (John 18.38). This penetrating question can be a good beginning for a sermon on the truth of God. When the source of your introduction is from Scripture, you have the advantage of giving a brief word of teaching about another passage from the Word of God. This allows your hearers to learn more Scripture. Be careful to use just a few phrases to explain the context and meaning of your quotation. Do not preach a separate sermon from a Scripture you quote only as an introduction to your sermon.
- **Personal Experience** - The themes of some sermons will have special relevance to your life. Your life experience may provide a good model of what to do -- or sometimes what not to do -- in a particular situation. Remember Paul's words, "For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Corinthians 4.5). People will quickly grow tired of hearing sermonic autobiographies of the preacher and his family. Only use this kind of introduction when the topic of your sermon has really made a great impression on your life.

In 2 Timothy 2.2, the Apostle Paul sets forth God's plan for the Gospel to move forward: "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others." He pictures a Gospel relay race where God's servants hand on the "baton" of His Word, one runner after the other. One hindrance to this race is fear in the workers. People can see the Preacher standing confidently before them and speaking. But when they look inside themselves, they may not see such courage to speak to others. I once began preaching from this text by recalling my fear as a 17-year-old new believer. Our church was involved in witnessing to shoppers on the streets of our small town. The members would go in pairs to share about Jesus with people. I was like the Arctic River -- frozen at the mouth! I thank God for my good friend, John, who took me with him. He did all the talking as we met people; I just stood there nervously. In my heart I was praying, for those we met, for John, and for me. I gradually gained confidence in the Lord as I saw John's gentle manner and the people's positive response. After some weeks, I began to say something to people while John observed. He gave me helpful suggestions on how I might improve my

presentation of the Good News. Eventually, I was able to teach others to share, my new partners stood in nervous silence, as I had done. It was my joy to see them move forward in “the power of the Spirit.” So the work of the Gospel moves forward, as one fearful worker after another finds confidence in God.

This personal testimony opened my listener’s ears to my sermon about evangelism, because many could relate to my feeling of the fear of people.

- **Popular Books and Films** - Books and films often capture the interest and imagination of people. Sometimes a memorable scene, character, or quotation will make a good connection to your sermon theme. There are two risks in using such an introduction. First, some of your listeners will not be familiar with what you refer to, and feel that this message does not relate to them. So for them to understand your point, you must briefly explain the setting for those who have not seen the film or read the book. Carefully word just a few sentences to do this quickly. Second, some of your listeners will be offended that you, as a “spiritual leader” spend time with popular films or books. Of course, they should be offended if what we are watching is not pleasing to God. But the media is one key to understanding our world. The wise preacher must know the thinking of his hearers.

Millions of believers have been encouraged by the writings of the British Christian C.S. Lewis. He was a professor of literature at Oxford and Cambridge Universities from 1924 until his death in 1963. Among the books he wrote is a series of Christian fantasies called *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I read these books to my young sons at night and I enjoyed them as much as they did. The first book in the series is, “*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.” In the book a young girl named Susan asks about the Lion, a figure of Jesus in the story: “Is he –quite safe?” The answer may challenge our conception of Jesus. A character replies, “Of course he is not safe. But he is good. He is the King, I tell you.” King Jesus is not safe – it is dangerous to follow Him -- but He is good.

Sometimes we need to remember that Jesus is a “Mighty God” as well as a “gentle shepherd.” Through such quotations you can both expose your listeners to some good books and offer a good introduction to your sermon.

- **Drama** - A number of churches use short one-act dramas to introduce the sermon. These “skits” are simple scenes with a few props and actors presenting a life issue in about five minutes. There is usually a question or problem raised, and the preacher’s message then addresses that issue. This requires planning. The preacher must plan his text and theme in advance for a “drama team” to compose or borrow an appropriate script. But when it is well planned and presented, such a drama can be very effective in gaining attention. Just make sure your sermon is equally well presented, because a poor sermon is a letdown after a powerful drama.

A tired looking mother sits at a table stirring some food in a bowl. Another bowl with fruit is also on the table. (People will imagine it is a kitchen.) Her teenage son runs in and grabs a piece of fruit for a snack. He turns to leave saying, “I won’t be home for dinner tonight. I am going out with my friends.” Before he is out the door, his mother shouts, “Come back here!” He walks back in reluctantly. She pleads, “You are always with your friends. I want us to eat dinner together as a family.” “Family!” the son says, raising his voice, “I want to be with my friends; they are the ones who really care for me.” He runs out the door. The mother hangs her head in pain. The lights go dim. As the actors quietly move from the front of the meeting room, the Preacher comes forward to speak. He begins his sermon with

the question, “Does this look like your home?” He proceeds to preach his sermon on the theme of the Christian family.

Another effective use of such introductory drama is to not mention the question the drama raises until the end of your sermon. Your listeners will often pay close attention throughout the entire message, eager to know the answer to the life situation raised by the actors.

If you really want to gain people’s attention week after week, you must use a variety of different introductions. The ideas listed above are suggested for you to consider the most appropriate introduction for each sermon. We preachers can complain that “modern entertainment” has forced us to become “entertainers” in order to hold people’s attention. But our complaints will do no good. People accustomed to a high standard of entertainment quality will not tolerate poor preaching. And these are the people God has called us to reach. If you are charged with the privilege of preaching, then you are responsible to do your best -- not as an entertainer, but as the Spirit-filled messenger of the living God. The faithful preacher, humbly proclaiming Scripture, can reach the heart of people much more effectively than the expensive spectacles of this world.

Five Suggestions for a Good Sermon Introduction

1. **Be Brief** - An English preacher named John Owen (1616-1683) once criticized a sermon introduction, saying, “You are so long spreading the table that I lost my appetite for the meal.” Remember the introduction to the sermon is not a separate sermon. You should not take more than two or three minutes to present the entire introduction. Then move into the main portion of your sermon.
2. **Be Appropriate** - What is the appropriate “mood” or “tone” for the sermon of the day? Is it a solemn message of judgment? Is it a joyful message of hope? Is it a challenging message of commitment? Your introduction begins to prepare the hearts and minds of your listeners for what follows. Begin carefully because the people may feel “tricked” if your introduction prepares them one way emotionally and you then quickly turn to a different tone. The preacher enters into the sacred territory of people’s hearts; do so with respect and courtesy. If you fail here you may lose your right to enter again.
3. **Be Modest** - Any preacher who plans to tell his people “everything” about “something” - in just thirty minutes - does not know “anything!” Someone has wisely advised us preachers, “Do not lay the foundation for a cathedral and then build only a prayer closet.” A common mistake of new preachers – who are excited about the many things they are learning – is to cover too much material. It is sobering to realize that our people will not remember very much. It is better to give them a clear presentation of one main truth and have them look forward to your teaching of more truth next week. “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Timothy 4.2).
4. **Be Interesting** - Perhaps the best way to inspire interest in others is to be interested yourself. This is expressed not just in what you say, but even more in how you say it. One study revealed that 80% of all communication is “non-verbal.” Is preaching this sermon drudgery to you? Would you want to be a listener to what you are about to say? Are you preaching because you “have to” or because you “want to?” Your hearers will quickly feel

these answers. The answers will come not just from your words, but also from the expression on your face, the tone of your voice, your gestures, your posture, and your “eye contact” with them. Someone has called these things “body language,” and it speaks loudly in its silence. Only God can put this deep interest in you. Spend time with Him in prayer until He does. If His “fire” does not burn in you, how will you light the fire in others?

5. Be Suggestive - The introduction is not meant to answer questions, but to raise them. The questions must stir the minds and hearts of the people. Your task is to arouse their curiosity, to make them wonder what you will say. You are the “guide” who invites them to journey a little further into the majestic forest of God’s Truth. You are not content for them to “remain as they are.” You want them to become more and more like Jesus by the working of the Spirit through the Word. The effectiveness of your “invitation” -- as a tool of God’s Holy Spirit - determines how many will follow along in the Scriptures for the next few minutes. The cry of your heart is that they all might, “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34.8).

Will your listeners put down their “remote control” and listen to your sermon? Pray, pray, pray. We must strive to attract them to listen through our effective introductions. Paul described his preaching ministry saying, “Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is plain to your conscience” (2 Corinthians 5.11). The fact that we “all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (v. 10) should make us use all our energy, wisdom, and creativity to be faithful as “Christ’s ambassadors” (v. 20). Because of this high calling, our message – from the introduction to the conclusion – must be plain and persuasive. What a holy and fearful privilege to be a messenger of the King.

9. How Can I Keep Their Attention? - Delivery and Illustrations

George Whitefield (1714-1770), a powerful English preacher, is said to have had strong words for a person who fell asleep during his sermon. He began speaking to one sleeper very quietly, saying, "If I were only speaking my own words, I would not care if you sleep." Then he continued in a loud powerful shout, "BUT I AM SPEAKING THE WORDS OF GOD AND I DEMAND THAT YOU LISTEN!" Whitefield's message is still true today. (As a traveling evangelist he could shout at the sleepers; if you must see them every week, you have to be more diplomatic.) We are also called to speak the very Word of God, and people must listen. It was his passion for the glory of God that demanded their attention. It was his concern for their everlasting souls that forced him to shout. We cannot make people believe our message, or even enjoy it, but we can do our best to make sure that they hear it. You must be very careful about how you do this. Jesus told those He sent out to preach the Kingdom: "Be as shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10.16).

Distractions and Challenges

There are many things that may distract people's attention from your sermon:

- Sometimes the meeting room is hot or stuffy. Charles Spurgeon told his preaching students, "Open the windows and let in the fresh air." We do not want a warm cozy room that is perfect for sleeping.
- There can be outside noises that divert attention. Yet, sometimes those noises help remind us that we are not to escape the world, but to take God's message into it.
- I have struggled to keep people's attention when the singing and other parts of the worship have been overly long, and the people are already eager to go home.
- One common problem is that many church members sit as far from the front as possible. (Someone should design a church meeting hall where every seat is in the "back row.") It is very distracting when the latecomers have to climb over everyone looking for a seat. I have seen new people refuse to enter the hall and take the vacant seats in the front. They are too ashamed to walk past the members huddled in the back. Move forward, church!
- Technical problems can create a disturbance. I preached in Africa during an electrical power failure. It was very hard to preach from notes in pitch darkness! The church I pastored in Hawaii had microphones that always did something distracting. (At times I felt we should have an exorcism to cast "demons" out of the microphones, and the absent-minded worker who tried to operate them.)
- Then there is the constant struggle of speaking to people whose Saturday activities have made them unable to fully concentrate on your message. Among your listeners are people who have worked too long, slept too little, eaten too full, drunk too much, and played too hard the day before -- and some have done them all!
- Sometimes a crying child is a distraction.

Children in the church are both a blessing and a challenge. They are a blessing because Jesus commends their presence -- “the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19.14). We must never be like the disciples who “rebuked those who brought them” (v. 13). They belong in church as much as anyone -- if not more! It is a blessing to see an entire family sitting together in worship. What a thrill it is to see a child “grow in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2.52).

The presence of children in our worship gives us added challenges. One challenge is whether the children should be separated from the adults during the preaching time. This is the practice in many churches. This requires that you have workers dedicated to their training and instruction. Pastors must remember that the children’s workers who miss the sermon need to hear the Word preached too. This was one of the reasons we had two worship services in our church. We began with less than fifty people in each service, but the additional service provided for the spiritual needs of those who “worked” during the other service. Another possibility is for the children to remain in the service during the preaching. There are many fine churches that have chosen to do this. This choice forces the preacher to make his message more simple and understandable for the young ones. Do not be surprised when they begin to squirm and whisper (or make even louder noises) after a few minutes -- that is what children do. (Children have a good excuse for making noise -- unlike their parents.) Whatever your decision on this issue, I suggest you make sure some women of the church are ready to help mothers with their children. If necessary, they should guide them outside the meeting room to cry, play, feed, or be changed. It is a real challenge to preach when everyone is looking at a crying baby. I sometimes try and pull the attention of the people back to the preaching by saying, “Do not worry about the baby, she will be fine. Let us continue to hear the message.” Very rarely you have to stop the preaching for a few minutes and gently help someone in distress. (Yet, it is much more natural for the church women to do this. The baby’s mother will likely be more embarrassed to have the preacher stop and come to help!) Most of the time it is best to patiently keep preaching; the disturbance will quickly pass. The fact that you can do your work of preaching while a baby cries shows the members that they should be able to do their work of listening, too. When the preacher and members show special love for children, they are being like Jesus. Many young families leave churches that fail to show Christian love for their children. Such families form the foundation of good, strong churches, so be very prayerful and sensitive to all those involved. Train your church leaders to help create an atmosphere where it is easy to listen. Keeping people’s attention is a struggle; with God’s help and some creative wisdom you will succeed.

Delivery - Improving Your Presentation

- VOICE - Your chief instrument in preaching is your voice.

This is quite obvious, but sometimes the preacher does not employ the full range of his instrument. I once had a professional opera singer in my church that offered me voice lessons. For several months I refused his offer, thinking such exercises would be vain. Eventually I thought, “Why not?” I now appreciate the sessions he held to improve the use of my voice. Honestly, I felt awkward standing in front of him doing vocal exercises. But as a voice professional, he revealed some mistakes I was making. He showed me how to better project my voice, from my diaphragm. Benjamin Franklin once said he could hear George Whitefield preaching in the streets of Philadelphia from one mile away -- long before the

invention of microphones. I do not think I have quite reached that level of volume yet, but I have improved my voice usage.

Of course, it is also possible to sleep through shouting; some people can sleep through anything! Sometimes it is more effective to stop -- and in the midst of the silence the sleeper will awaken to see what all the quiet is about. Other times you may bring your voice to a whisper, or even raise it to a shout. You may find it necessary to clap your hands, snap your fingers, or pound the pulpit. The best rule is to use variety in tone, speed, and volume. If you speak or shout in the same tone all the time, your listeners may stop listening. You'll soon find that the human species has managed to sleep with their eyes, and even their Bibles, open!

- **VISUAL FACTORS** - What people “see” in your sermon

As mentioned earlier, one researcher said that 80% of all communication is non-verbal. This may be part of the reason for so much misunderstanding. We may think we are using the right words, but our other forms of communication send out a conflicting message. What do people see when you are preaching?

One thing they should see very much of is your eyes. The eye is the “window of the soul.” It is not easy to communicate from your heart to the heart of another without looking them in the eye. Some people will not trust a person who never looks them in the eye. But eye contact is not easy. Many times we do not know our message as well as we should, and we need to look at our notes. Yet, if I had to choose between remembering everything in my notes and looking at the people, I would choose looking at the people. For me the greatest difficulty in looking people in the eye is a feeling of “shyness.” Even though I have been preaching for many years, I still do not feel entirely comfortable. Perhaps this is God’s blessing, so I will trust in Him, and not in my own ability. Sometimes I find it easier to focus my eyes just over the heads of the people and look at the back wall of the room. This is not good, but it is better than keeping your head down. It is best when we gradually move our eyes around the congregation, looking at all the people.

Our listeners also see our face. God has given us the face; we choose the expression. Our expression should be fitting to our theme. Are we preaching about the love of God with a stern frown on our face? Do we preach about the fear of God with a foolish smile? If our message is really something from our heart, our face will probably have the right expression. Here is where we need critique from faithful friends. One bad thing I do with my face is to wrinkle my nose. I thank my wife for pointing this out to me -- although I do not always like to hear it! Many preachers have developed some strange facial expressions and habits that are a distraction. I heard recently of a pastor in his mid-sixties who serves a large congregation. For years this man has twisted his tongue around in his mouth in some strange manner during his sermons. Apparently every one in the church knows this -- but him. It is too bad no one has pointed out this bad habit to him, so that people would talk more about the message and less about the tongue that delivered it.

People also look at our body. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote about Dr. John A. Hutton, one of the pastors who preceded him at Westminster Chapel in London: “He believed that a preacher should preach with the whole of his body -- and that was certainly true of him. He told us that he preached as much with his legs as with his head...watching him, one found that it was true!.. He did not just stand like a statue and utter words through his lips: the entire

person was engaged -- gestures, activity, and so on.” Our posture should be supportive of our message. If we are doing something strange or unnatural, it will take away the attention people should give to the message. Strive to stand upright with both feet placed firmly on the ground. I must confess that I have a tendency to rock back and forth from my toes to my heels. As a tall person, I sometimes tend to slouch or lean on the pulpit. Thank the Lord for faithful critics who exhort us to stand up straight, with our shoulders back. We do not want to stand like a statue, but we also do not want to contort like a gymnast.

The congregation will also see clothes on your body -- I hope! What the preacher wears is an important consideration. My suggestion is that your clothes be neat, clean, ironed, and in style with the day. Preachers usually do not have money for a fancy wardrobe, but they should have a good suit, and a few nice shirts, ties, and shoes. Your wardrobe should be determined partly by your “target audience.” An evangelical pastor in Istanbul, Turkey, told me that he wears a robe similar to the Orthodox priests because this is what the Turkish people expect a pastor to wear. When I served the Anglican Church of Uganda, I wore a clerical collar and robe for preaching, like my African colleagues. When I pastored a church in Hawaii, we had three worship services. During the contemporary service I wore a shirt and tie. Our traditional service was more formal, so I put on a preaching gown over my shirt and tie. Our evening family service was very relaxed and I wore an open-collared, printed Hawaiian shirt, and sometimes I even wore sandals. Some pastors in Hawaii wear t-shirts and bathing suits! I have found that most pastors in Kazakhstan wear a suit and tie. What we wear should not be primarily for our own benefit, but for others -- like all of our Christian life. Paul’s selfless words can also guide our choice of dress: “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do this for the sake of the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9.22,23).

People will also see our hands. Many preachers, me included, find it hard to know what to do with our hands. I know from experience some things not to do with my hands. It is best not to stuff them in your pockets, to grasp them on the pulpit, to twist them behind your back, or to stick your fingers in your ears, eyes, mouth, or nose. You may want to intentionally make some of these “forbidden” hand motions to make a point in your sermon, but those should be planned gestures and not a thoughtless reflex. The “resting position” for our hands should be hanging down by our sides, or sometimes placed gently on the sides of the pulpit.

A good preacher learns to preach with his hands. I suggest that your Bible and notes be placed on a stand on front of you so that your hands are also free to preach. Microphones are better placed on a stand, or even better a small one clipped to your lapel. Hand movements should enhance your message and not distract from it. An “open” hand is much more inclusive and inviting than a pointed finger. Hand motions should be above, and never below, the waist. Motions made below the waist look weak and awkward. One idea is that the bigger the room, the higher your hand movements should be; holding your hands above your shoulders may look strange in a small area, but the same motion may be very appropriate in a large room. Another suggestion is to make only one hand motion per idea. People expect some hand and body movement to emphasize and enhance the message. But they do not want your hands to fly through the air like a Karate instructor. One preacher told me about what he saw as he Fast-Forwarded a videotape of his sermon. (Watching your preaching on videotape is very instructive and humbling.) This brother was surprised to see his hand moving up to his forehead, almost like a soldier’s salute, many times throughout his

sermon. He was not conscious of this action, but now he is able to stop this unthinking behavior. The more comfortable you feel in preaching, the more natural your hand motions will be.

Most of all, when you preach, people will see YOU. They will not see the great preachers we may try to imitate, pastors and professors we have known, or the great preachers of the world -- George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon, Billy Graham, Festo Kivengere, Luis Palau, Charles Swindoll, or John Wesley. They will see the great preacher that God is making you. The more naturally you present His Word, the better. Too many preachers are frustrated that they are not like someone else. Such feelings of comparison and inadequacy are not helpful or right. God's Word to Jeremiah applies to each of us: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1.5). Of course, the Lord Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of these words, but they apply to all of us who speak today in Jesus' name. Sometimes we may share the personal doubts of Jeremiah who said, "Ah, Sovereign Lord, I do not know how to speak, I am only a child" (Jeremiah 1.6). But God told him not to speak such words of unbelief, and not to be afraid. His promise to our ancient colleague should encourage our hearts. "Then the Lord reached out His hand and touched my mouth and said to me, 'Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and plant'" (Jeremiah 1.9,10). We also are privileged to preach a word that will never fail; its living power is irresistible. And God will accomplish His sovereign purposes through our preaching of this Word.

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is his personal defense against "super-apostles" who sought to discredit his ministry (12.11). One of their accusations was that Paul was not a very good preacher. By this they meant that he was not an eloquent orator -- a quality the people of Corinth valued highly (1 Corinthians 2.1). Some people then, as now, were "looking only on the surface of things" (10.7). But what he may have lacked in polished oration, Paul made up for in his devotion and hard work in the Gospel (chapters 11 and 12). Of course we want to be the best messengers possible for God. We must never be lazy in our preparation and presentation of His Word. Yet the great Apostle Paul is remembered today for the total impact of his life and message, and not because of his great orations. Whether God gives us the "plain speech" of Paul (4.2) or the eloquence of his colleague Apollos, who was more popular with the Corinthians for his skilled oratory (1 Corinthians 3.1-6, 4.6,7), we are to be faithful to our unique calling and gifting. "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God" (2.17). God is making you exactly the preacher He wants you to be. Be patient, with yourself and others -- God is not finished with us yet (Philippians 1.6).

- LANGUAGE - choosing the best words

The Preacher is a craftsman who works with words. We are artisans who must choose each word carefully. There are at least three reasons we must preach as skilled "wordsmiths." First, we want our words to accurately express the true doctrines of Scripture. We know that "every word of Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching" (2 Timothy 3.16). So also, every word of our sermons about these inspired Scriptures is important. Second, we want to be faithful to the God of Scripture who is alive, powerful, glorious, and creative. Our God filled His world with imagination, wonder, and diversity; therefore, our messages about Him should reflect His creativity. Third, variety in our choice of words will help to hold the

interest of our listeners. Our words should convey images in color, not merely black and white. “A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Proverbs 25.11). It is a sin against God and His Word to preach boring sermons, filled with words that are flat, false, and colorless.

The words you select for your sermon should arouse the senses of your people - sight, smell, touch, and taste, in addition to hearing. Ezekiel said that his encounter with the Word of God “tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth” (3.3). God called him to be faithful among the rebellious Israelites. He told Ezekiel, “I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint” (3.9). When he went into the presence of God, he heard “the sound of the wings of the living creatures brushing against each other and the sound of the wheels beside them, a loud rumbling sound” (3.13). Ezekiel is a preacher whose words aroused all the senses of his hearers! Your description of Jesus and his disciples caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee should be so real that people feel the wind on their faces. When you portray God’s everlasting fire of judgment, their nostrils should be filled with the stench. The bodies of your listeners should wince in pain when you preach the crucifixion. Paul’s sermons in Galatia were so vivid he told the Galatians, “Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified” (3.1). In this way people will experience your message with more than their sense of hearing; their whole person will encounter the living Lord and His powerful Word.

Scripture reveals God Himself with great fullness and creativity. There are many names and titles for God recorded in His Book. Here are just a few titles ascribed to God the Father: Abba, Father (Rom 8.15), Ancient of Days (Dan 7.9), Father of Compassion (2 Cor 1.3), Almighty (Gen 17.1,2), God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod 3.6). God of Hope (Rom 15.13), Rock (Deut 32.4). Jesus is described, among many other names, as: Alpha and Omega (Rev 1.8), Apostle and High Priest (Heb 3.1), Bread of Life (John 6.35), the Power and Wisdom of God (1 Cor 1.24), Gate (John 10.7-9), Horn of Salvation (Luke 1.69), Prince (Acts 5.31), Rising Sun (Luke 1.78). The Holy Spirit also is given many titles, such as: Breath of the Almighty (Job 32.8), Counselor (John 14.16), God’s Seed (1 John 3.9), Seal (Ephes 4.30), Spirit of Glory (1 Peter 4.14), Living Water (John 7.38-39). These are just a few of the words the Bible uses to describe our God. We are poor students of Scripture, and bad preachers, if our description of God ever becomes dull or boring.

We must also be careful about what we may be saying thoughtlessly. One bad habit I have is to make the sound “uh” between my words. For example, “We can thank God that He...uh, uh, uh, sent His Son to be our Savior and...uh, uh, uh, give us a new life!” It is not something I plan to do; in fact, I am not aware that I am doing it. I can thank my wife for making me more aware of this problem. One Sunday after church she said, “How many times do you think you made the sound ‘uh’ during your sermon?” “Oh, I don’t know,” I answered, “maybe five or six.” “You are right, five and six -- you made that noise fifty-six times!” Paul’s words about clear speech in the church apply to the thoughtless noises I was making. “Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what is being played unless there is clear distinction in the notes? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for the battle?” (1 Cor 14.7,8). So do not be like me, making fifty-six unclear sounds in your sermon!

Illustrations - Windows to Bring Light into the Sermon

A sermon without illustrations is like a house without windows. I have noticed my listeners looking up with great interest when I begin to share an illustration. Their faces reveal new understanding and insight as illustrations are told. People love good stories, but not every good story makes a good sermon illustration. A good illustration carries your point from the pages of ancient Scripture into the world of your hearers. But the misuse of an illustration actually hinders the listener's understanding of Scripture. Here are some things to keep in mind as you "hang the windows in your house":

- Be Discreet

Some pastors carelessly share the secrets of their members through illustrations. Actually, this is quite easy to do, especially when your mind is so concerned about their situation. Perhaps we think we will protect others from falling into the same problem. I have done this. But this was very foolish. When we say, "I know a person who..."; many minds begin to wonder who we are talking about. Eyes begin to gaze around the meeting place. Nobody wants their life story to be "shown on the big screen" of our sermon. When we share people's secrets we break their trust. They will never dare to share their heart again; for fear that it will become the subject of next week's sermon illustration. It is the duty of a believer, and especially a leader, to be discreet about people's lives.

- Be Relevant

One Sunday I heard an American missionary preaching in Mombasa, Kenya. My family was the only other Americans in the church. Yet the preacher shared several illustrations about American pioneers, American football, and even American politics. I cannot imagine what our Kenyan brothers and sisters understood from these stories. I doubt whether they were windows to shed light on the Scripture. For the Africans they were probably just novel stories of strange American customs, with no connection to the sermon text. Our illustrations should be relevant to both our hearers and the biblical text. The preacher speaks to the hearts of his people when he displays understanding of their culture, sports, politics, and traditions as he explains the text of Scripture.

- Be Balanced

It is sobering to ask those who listen to your sermon, "What do you remember from the sermon?" If they remember anything, it will most often be the stories or illustrations. Unfortunately, they often find it more difficult to remember the Scripture that we were trying to illustrate. In this case the illustration becomes the house itself, not the window intended to illumine the house. Sometimes this "memory lapse" is because the illustration was out of balance. There are many great, powerful, exciting stories -- but some of these are too great to be good sermon illustrations. Such powerful stories tend to pull people's attention away from the Scripture text. Fascination for such stories is similar to what Paul warns against when he says, "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (2 Timothy 4.3,4). Paul refers here to false teaching, not just bad sermon illustrations. But illustrations that steal the listener's attention from the Word can violate the principle the Apostle lays down here. If your hearers cannot remember the text, but only your stories, then your illustrations are out of balance. The tail has begun to wag the dog.

- Be Humble

“For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Corinthians 4.5). This humble spirit should always be evident in our preaching. Some preachers use their sermons as an opportunity to display themselves. Some tell stories from their lives to make themselves look good. Be very careful not to fall into this danger. Sometimes our own sins and mistakes are the best illustrations. Out of our weakness we can reveal the strong grace of God.

- Be Truthful

The fisherman is easily tempted to add a few centimeters to the fish when he tells the story -- and so is the preacher. Instead of three people receiving Christ we say, “about ten.” If more than ten are converted it is “a revival”! If our illustrations are not true, people may doubt the rest of our sermon? How about the Scriptures? How about God Himself? God does not need us to stretch the truth to convince others. Jesus never hides his scars to win disciples. He said, “When He, the Spirit of Truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth” (John 16.13).

- Be Natural

Most new preachers mimic the manner of their pastors and professors. This imitation is a normal part of the learning process. It can take five years of preaching to develop your own preaching style. But remember that young David could not fight Goliath in King Saul’s armor. I pray that you will grow into the style and manner of speaking that is most natural to your God-given personality. If it is natural for you to use humor, do so with care and respect. If it is natural for you to be academic, do so, but remember those who are simple in mind and faith. If it is natural for you to be passionate, do so, but realize our faith is more than just a feeling. Use illustrations that are most appropriate to your own style.

- Be Brief

“One morning I got up with a bit of a stomach ache. I ate too much at a party the night before. So I skipped breakfast that day. By noon I was very hungry. It happened that I was going to meet a friend for lunch at an Indian restaurant. It was great that the cross-town trolley bus stopped right in front of the restaurant. When I went inside, a beautiful Indian hostess led me to a table. When my friend arrived, we ordered some lamb stew. As we ate he told me about why he rejected the message of Christianity....”

Does that sound like any sermon illustration you have heard? Unfortunately, we hear this kind of rambling many times in sermons. We do not know if the message is about stomachs, over-eating, trolley buses, beautiful Indian women, or lamb stew. Such preachers take our imagination in too many directions. We soon forget the Scripture he seeks to illustrate, and the point he is trying to make. All of those details confuse the point of the sermon. It would be much better to say, “A friend of mine once told me that he rejected Christianity because...” Then the listener will focus right on the point -- why someone would reject the faith. And then you can easily bring their mind back to the Scripture text you are using to refute that rejection. Choose each word of the illustration very carefully. I suggest that you use no more than five sentences to tell the illustration. If it is longer, cut out all

unnecessary details. You do not want your listener to be thinking about lamb stew or beautiful Indian women, but God and His Word!

Types of Illustrations

There are several different types of illustrations. The best suggestion, as in all our preaching, is creativity and variety. We keep our listeners' attention when we remember the element of surprise. A preacher that is predictable is quickly considered boring.

- Phrases of Speech

Preachers are artisans who paint with words. Our choice of words often determines whether our message is remembered or forgotten. Select words that trigger the senses of your listeners. Their sight, smell, hearing, and touch can all be affected with your words. Sin can be more than “terrible,” it can be “a stench in the nostrils of a holy God.” Heaven can be more than “nice,” it can be “filled with the choirs of angels' praise.” We can say that “God loves us,” or “God is a Father who wraps His loving arms around us.” Salvation can be “wonderful” or it can be “a rainbow of God’s grace, mercy, and forgiveness.” We can choose whether to preach in color or in black and white. This extra creative effort helps our hearers become more involved in our message.

- Analogy

The Bible is filled with analogy. Jesus is “the bread of life” and “the true vine” (John 6.35 & 15.1). Such analogies communicate in memorable color and life. They make us think in three dimensions, not just in flat theories and ideas.

- Parable

Jesus was a master storyteller, and parables were his favorite tool. We do well to follow His creative example. We can set forth God’s truth from biblical parables, and also from the parables of our culture and language. Paul quoted Athenian poets (Acts 17.28) and Cretan prophets (Titus 1.12) to bring God’s truth to the hearts of his hearers.

- Bible Characters and Stories

Biblical characters often illustrate just the point we are trying to make; sometimes by their good example, other times through their failures. Abraham offers us many examples of the life of faith. Jacob shows that even “children of promise” need repentance to be saved. Jeremiah’s faithful ministry is a picture of endurance and obedience in the midst of opposition.

- Historical Allusion

History reveals God’s action in the world. I like to compare our salvation to the Allied victory won on D-Day -- June 6, 1944. On that day, through much death and suffering, the head of the Nazi serpent was crushed. The Allies landed on continental Europe and began their certain march to victory in Berlin. Many would die before that victory was finalized, but

the triumph of D-Day made victory certain. Likewise, Jesus' death on the cross crushed the serpent's head. There will be much suffering until He comes again to consummate His victory, but the cross and empty tomb make His triumph sure.

Sources of Illustrations

“Where do we get our illustrations?” This is a question many pastors often ask. Some pastors have good systems of recording and saving good illustrations. I wish I did. If you are able to write and file the illustrations you hear through your years of preaching, I encourage you to do so. They will be valuable tools for your preaching.

- The Bible

Of course, the best source of illustrations is the Bible. When you share a story from the Bible you do not usually have to worry about its “cultural relevance.” This is because many of your hearers will be familiar with the culture of the Bible. Scripture contains an abundance of illustrations on many subjects. Another benefit of using the Bible for illustrations is that you are able to teach the people more Scripture. But remember to be brief. Do not preach a whole new sermon when you use a Scripture text for illustrations.

- Personal Experience

Earlier I cautioned against “preaching ourselves” -- but this does not mean we should never tell stories from our lives. Our example -- both our victories and our failures -- can be helpful for people to know how to “live out” the truth of Scripture. Sometimes your experience can be an affirmation of God's ancient truths. Of course, the focus of the message must remain on Him.

- Nature

Jesus was a master of illustrations from nature. People could easily understand His references to the birds of the air, the clouds on the horizon, and the flowers of the field. The Apostle Paul also used such illustrations. He did so when he spoke to illiterate Gentiles in Lystra, telling them about “rain from heaven and crops in their seasons” (Acts 14.19). Notice how well he moved from the “known to the unknown” in his preaching. Through such illustrations, we can move our listeners from the natural world, which they know, into the spiritual world revealed in Christ.

- Current Events

What is the news in your city? What is happening around the world? Remember that your sermon is like a bridge between the ancient text and the modern world. Sometimes an illustration from current events will make help your listeners' thoughts move across that bridge. As you mention the events that they are thinking about, you show them the contemporary relevance of Scripture. But again, I must emphasize that the purpose of the sermon is to explain the Bible, not to provide a commentary on the news of the week. One Sunday, I preached from Ephesians about “the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints” (1.18). People in Kazakhstan were helped to understand this great truth when I reminded them about the huge oil reserves recently discovered in their Caspian Sea. That buried

accumulation of potential earthly riches points to the abundance of spiritual wealth hidden in Christ.

- Parables

Of course we know that Jesus was the master preacher of parables. But it was not just our Lord who employed such illustrations. Many Old Testament prophets also used parables in their preaching. Isaiah's parable of the vineyard may have been the basis of Jesus' similar teachings (Isaiah 5.1-7 / John 15). Nathan confronted the sins of King David with a parable about a man and his sheep (2 Samuel 12). God said, "I spoke to the prophets, gave them many visions, and told parables through them" (Hosea 12.10). And so the modern preacher follows a noble tradition as he uses parables to illustrate God's truth. We should use parables from Scripture and those from our cultural traditions. If it is true, it is from God – all truth is God's truth – and it is useful to communicate The Truth.

- People

People are a great illustration. Children teach us what we should be like in order to enter God's kingdom. Jesus talked about the widow who persisted in her pursuit of justice, and the judge who finally listened to her. We learn from good people and bad people, rich and poor, men and women, known and unknown. An illustration about people helps us to see the principles of Scripture clothed in flesh and blood.

- Arts and Media

The whole world is now under the influence of Western music and film. This popular media has the greatest influence on modern society. I am not sure if this is good or bad, but it is true. Young people everywhere know the latest worldwide music and videos. It is not easy for a busy pastor to keep up with this fast-changing industry. But you can talk to young people about what they are watching and hearing. Through what you learn you can consider how to address the eternal gospel to this changing world. If your sermon contains the lyrics of a popular song, or a reference to a recent film, you will gain the attention of young people, and also many adults. We may not agree with the moral standards of the media, but this is one "mission field" we must reach through our preaching. All truth is from God, even when spoken by godless rock stars.

- Science

The study of God's world provides endless resources for sermon illustrations. Astronomers have not found the limits of the universe, but our God is so awesome that "with the breadth of his hand he marks off the heavens" (Isaiah 40.12). Space exploration has revealed that stars emit sounds that are almost like music. Scripture says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech" (Psalm 19.1,2). Oceanographers debate just how deep the world's oceans are. No matter how deep their waters, our God has "hurled our iniquities into the depth of the sea" (Micah 7.19). Meteorologists tell us that no two snowflakes are the same. In the same way, God has made each person unique: "For you created me in my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139.13,14). Your references to science should not be overly technical and complex.

But the wise preacher realizes that God's world is filled with examples of the principles of His Word. "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" (Psalm 24.1).

- Familiar Objects

Kazakhstan recently adopted a mandatory seat belt law. Now drivers can be fined for failing to wear their seat belts. But most city drivers give only outward allegiance to this mandate. They drape the belt over their shoulder, so that the policeman can see it, but they do not attach it. In the eyes of the police it looks like these drivers are obeying the law. But in reality they are giving only an outward show. God is not pleased with empty outward conformity. He wants true obedience from the heart.

Broken shoelaces are a great test of self-control. Quite often they break when we are rushing to get out the door; we know it will make us late! Do we get angry? Sometimes that broken lace can unleash a volcano of anger that rages deep within us. Familiar objects like seat belts and shoelaces are things all our listeners can identify with. When Paul urged Timothy to live a holy life, he reminded him of familiar household containers. Only the precious vessels -- made of gold and silver -- are reserved for special purposes. "If a man cleanses himself...he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work" (2 Timothy 2.21).

- Other sermons

As a preacher I love to hear the good sermons of others. I especially appreciate hearing their sermon illustrations. I find it helpful to write them down for future use. Sometimes I will credit my sources when I preach another's illustration, other times I do not. It is likely that the preacher I heard borrowed it from someone else! You need to decide when such acknowledgment is appropriate. At times it can appear that you are bragging about all the references you have accumulated. A sermon is a declaration of Scripture, not an essay with footnotes. However, sometimes mentioning the name of good authors and theologians can guide your listeners in their own studies. Also, you are helped to stay humble when people know that not all the ideas in your sermon originated with you. It is good for them to know that preachers also need to read and study.

I strive to be honest when I borrow an illustration. I do not include myself in a story in which I was not involved. I do not say "I" did this or that, but that "someone" said this or did that. There are books of published sermons; many of them contain excellent illustrations. Also, there are books and journals that contain hundreds of sermon illustrations used by other preachers. These printed illustrations can be helpful, but be careful and wise in your selection. Something too old and foreign fails to open a window to the meaning of our text.

- The Meeting

As I go into the worship service my thoughts are filled with the sermon I am about to preach. Often I feel a sense of inadequacy; I wish that I had prayed more, studied more, or had a better outline. Many times I have prayed, confessing my failures, but thanking God for His adequacy; His strength is made perfect in my weakness. While the service continues, I will review the sermon in my mind, the opening, the main points, and the conclusion -- I am thinking and praying.

Many times God has shown me something in those final minutes to use as an illustration; perhaps it is something said in a testimony before the sermon, the words of a song, or even the message of a banner that hangs in the church. It can be very effective to make the connection: “Just like the words of the song we just sang...” Or, “As the banner hanging here in the room declares...” I believe the Holy Spirit ties together the events of the entire service to bring God’s truth into our hearts. Sometimes your illustration from what has occurred in the service affirms His overall purpose for the meeting.

So, if you are on the lookout for sermon illustrations, you will find them in many places. You will find them during the worship service, in popular media, in the world of people, science, and best of all in the Bible itself. Scripture says, “The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple” (Psalm 119.130). Your preaching of the word has a part to play in this “unfolding” (or “entrance,” as other versions read). May our voice, our hands, our face, our manner -- and our illustrations -- all enhance God’s light of understanding, so that all our hearers, from the wise to the simple, will not “see” us, but rather encounter God and His grace through our preaching of His Word.

10. How Can I Finish Well? - The Conclusion

Our family once flew aboard “Air Kazakhstan” from Almaty to Istanbul, Turkey. We were apprehensive as we boarded their aged Russian aircraft. We prayed for safety. We took off smoothly and traveled well for five and a half hours across Central Asia. As we neared Istanbul, we were eager to arrive. I said another prayer, knowing that landing an airplane is not an easy task. The pilot lowered the plane, put the wheels down, and landed safely! We joined the passengers in appreciative applause. Thank God we were safe!

A pilot has extensive training to land the plane. The landing is critical to the success of the flight. Would it have been a “good” flight if we had not landed safely? Could the pilot say, “My takeoff was good, and for over five hours I managed to keep a straight course. But I had some problems at the end, and we crashed”? Would people respond, “Great job, Captain? That small problem at the end doesn’t matter; it was a good flight.” How ridiculous. A crash landing means the whole flight is a failure.

Similarly, a good sermon does not just end by itself. Many preachers have not understood this fact. Too many potentially good sermons have a “crash landing” because there was no prepared conclusion. Since a sermon does not just end “by itself,” we must now consider how to plan a good ending.

Two Things Needed in Your Conclusion

There are many ways to structure and present your conclusion, but a good ending has two important elements – a review of the message, and an appeal to action.

1) A Review of the Message

One old preacher explained his method by saying, “I tell them what I am going to tell them, then I tell them, and then I tell them what I told them!” This three-point preaching plan is a good place to begin. It helps the new preacher work to make his points clear and simple. The more experienced preacher may modify this formula. Being too predictable, week after week, can lead to monotony. Yet we should not stray too far from this simple approach.

This plan is effective because people forget. By the time you have explained the third point of your sermon, some people will have completely forgotten the first point! (I’m sorry to be discouraging, but this is painfully true.) That is why a review of the main points is helpful and necessary. This review serves to “tie together” any loose ends in the message and make a neat package for the congregation to “take home.” As you prepare your sermon points, they may seem very logical and well connected in your mind. But our hearers may not make the connections as easily. You may not have made your point clearly, or your hearers may not be listening very intently. So the final review helps to make your main points -- and their connections -- clearer.

Many preachers use headings that are easy to remember. For example, they may select words that begin with the same letter of the alphabet, or words that rhyme. Some preachers phrase the words of their main points into a poem or lyric. Some of these techniques can appear silly, but they make your points easier to remember. In Jackson, Mississippi, I heard a great sermon preached by a big Black American with a shaved head who called himself “Mr.

Clean.” His sermon was entitled, “Four Things God Does NOT Know!” He gripped everyone’s attention as he explained:

1. God does not know a sin He does not hate.
2. God does not know a sinner He does not love.
3. God does not know any way of salvation except through the blood of Jesus.
4. God does not know a better time to be saved than right now.

It has been more than twenty-five years since I heard that sermon, and I still remember the points clearly. So using words, phrases, and memory techniques can help our people remember the main points of the message. As you conclude the sermon, you should review the points.

Remember, though, that the conclusion is a review, and not a second sermon. People do not want to hear every detail of the message again; to do this is to insult their intelligence. They are now looking at their watches and getting ready to leave. Some are already anticipating their delicious lunch! So, “tell them what you told them,” but do not tell them EVERYTHING you told them. Do not make the closing complicated. If you forgot to say something earlier in the sermon, do not try to squeeze it into the conclusion!

2) An Appeal to Action

Remember that a sermon is not a lecture. People listen to a lecture to gain information. People listening to a sermon should gain *transformation*. After you have set forth the glorious principles and promises of God, people need to respond. The responses will vary according to the Scripture text, the application you make from that text, and the spiritual condition of the listener. Some listeners have never received Jesus as Lord and Savior; their response should be to repent and believe. Perhaps this message will move them closer to making that eternal decision. Our listeners bring many problems and needs as they come to listen. The Holy Spirit has a wonderful way of ministering to each person, exactly at his or her point of need.

Some preachers seem cold and distant. They feel that if they preach the right information and interpretation, their job is finished. But Jesus did not have that aloof attitude. His heart was deeply moved by the needs of His hearers. He was overwhelmingly saddened when they did not respond: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who sent you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing” (Luke 13.34). Paul displayed a similar passion in his preaching ministry: “We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well... For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into His kingdom and glory” (1 Thessalonians 2.8,11,12). We should preach for a response. People must do something after God has spoken to them.

But we do not know exactly what the response will be. Our calling is biblical preaching, not psychological manipulation. We cannot enter the sanctuary of the human heart, nor should we try. We do not know the true spiritual condition behind the listener’s smiling face. So we should leave the details of the response to the Holy Spirit. This was Paul’s

confidence for the Ephesians: “Surely you heard of Him and were taught in Him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus” (Ephesians 4.21). God’s Spirit takes His Word and applies it to the heart of each individual hearer. We must never try to evoke the response that we think they should make. If we try this, some will obey us out of religious loyalty. But we seek their obedience to Jesus their Lord, not to us.

To this end we must fervently pray throughout our preparation and our preaching, for ourselves and for our hearers. As we pray we express our confidence in the Lord to make His Word speak to the needs of each listener. I hope God gives many people to pray for your preaching ministry. Tell those who listen how much you need their prayers. England’s “Prince of Preachers,” Charles Spurgeon, credited his success to the large group who gathered to pray each time he preached in the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London. May God also give you such a band of prayer warriors to uplift your preaching ministry.

So our conclusion must contain both review and response. As you summarize the facts, you must summon your hearers to faith. “Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the Word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does” (James 1.22-25).

Forms of the Conclusion

As in all our preaching, our conclusions must include variety and balance. Closing with the same method again and again will bore your listeners. Here are some forms you may employ for effective conclusions.

- **Recapitulation**

This follows the advice of the old preacher who said, “tell them again.” Remember that this should be brief, clear, and concise.

Sometimes you may want to introduce a different presentation of your points in your closing. You may apply the message to specific groups of people in the church: fathers, mothers, children, single people, widows, leaders, etc. Apply the implications of the message to each group. An example of this is in a sermon from Peter’s message about the Word of God (1 Peter 1.22-2.3). This passage teaches that the Word of God is eternal and life changing. As you close this message, you may summarize with an appeal to three groups:

- 1) Leaders - “You must take your ministry very seriously. This Word is God’s eternal truth and you are charged to study it faithfully and teach it fully. Through this Word believers are born anew and grow to maturity. We must be faithful to feed them.”
- 2) Believers - “Are you faithfully reading and studying this Word? Do you pray for your pastor during the week as he prepares his sermons? You are privileged to have the Bible in your own language. To whom much has been given, much will be required. Take time every day to read the Word of God.”

- 3) Parents - “Do you teach the Bible to your children? It is a blessing when our children can learn the Bible in the church. Thank God for pastors and teachers who instruct them in the Scriptures. But it is primarily your duty, as parents, to teach them the Word. Let them hear the Word from your lips and see the Word in your lives.”

Another method of recapitulation is to phrase your points in simple questions. Perhaps you have preached from Hebrews 12 on the theme of God’s discipline. During the sermon you may have phrased your points in statements, such as:

1. God’s Discipline is to Refine Our Faith
2. God Disciplines Us Because He Loves Us
3. God’s Discipline Is An Evidence That We Are His Beloved Children

But during the conclusion you may convey the same information in a question-and-answer format:

1. What Is God’s Discipline? – His Process of Refining Our Faith
2. Why Does God Discipline? -- Because He Loves Us
3. Who Does God Discipline? -- His Beloved Children

The questions do not introduce any new information into the sermon; they are a review of what you have already preached. But the question format may help people think of it from a different viewpoint. People learn differently. Some people learn more through factual statements, others through questions and answers. We should be willing to do whatever we can to help everyone learn.

- Illustration

We have already considered the great effectiveness of illustrations. Sometimes a well-chosen illustration can be a compelling ending to a sermon. People often need a “picture” to understand abstract principles. Some illustrations can tie together the thoughts of your message and provide a memorable ending. Just make sure the story is an appropriate picture of how to obey and apply your sermon text.

Charles Colson preached one of the best closing illustrations I have ever heard. His stirring sermon challenged Christians to transform our society as “salt and light.” He closed with a true story about a monk named Telemachus. During the fourth century, this monk was prompted by the Spirit of God to travel to Rome. Upon arrival in that great city, he followed the huge crowds to the gladiator games in the Coliseum. There he watched with horror as men fought to the death. The crowds lusted for blood and cheered in approval. God prompted this monk to jump down to the floor of the massive arena. He approached a gladiator who towered over him with sword held high. Telemachus said, “In the name of Christ, forbear!” The spectators of the slaughter were indignant and stoned the peacemaker to death. When the Emperor was informed of this, he considered Telemachus a victorious martyr, and stopped the gladiator games forever. This believer, who paid the highest price, brought great transformation and blessing to the society.

- Quotation

Let them hear the voice of a person who has put into practice what your sermon has told them to do. Or, there may be an appropriate quote from someone who has opposed the point you have made, and lived to regret their decision. Often the quotes of Bible characters make a powerful ending. Joseph's words to his brothers are a good climax to a message on "God's Sovereignty." These brothers stood in terrified anticipation of Joseph's revenge. Yet, He graciously told them: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50.20).

- Personal Testimony

In your sermon you have been telling people to do something. Have you done it? What difference has this truth from Scripture made in your life? Perhaps you have struggled to do what you have been preaching about. This closing is best used when the theme of the message has made a deep impact on your own life. Just remember that Scripture does not need our "endorsement" to make it true! We must teach people to believe and obey because God commands them to do so. Sometimes even our failures offer an encouragement for people to press on in their struggle of faith.

I recently heard a good sermon on "Prayer." The preacher made the true observation that people often feel quite uncomfortable during sermons on prayer. This is because we often fail to pray. The preacher admitted that he also struggled with prayer. He regretted that he had missed many opportunities to pray. Then he made a simple closing application, saying that he wanted to begin and end each day with prayer, first thing in the morning and last thing at night. This simple reminder was an honest statement of what he felt he needed to do, and many who listened needed to do the same thing. He did not stand proudly on the mountaintop and thunder down commands and rebukes. He stood at our level and pointed us up to God's high and holy standard, inviting us to join him in the upward struggle.

- Compare the Alternatives

Ask your hearers what the consequences of ignoring your sermon will be. People may need to see the radical and eternal difference between receiving and rejecting the Lord and His Word. This can be a stirring conclusion to an evangelistic sermon, because in such a sermon you are especially challenging people to make a response to the Gospel. What will happen if they reject Jesus? What does it mean to receive Him?

James Boice closed a sermon on the resurrection with a powerful comparison:

"In the year 1899 two famous men died in America. One was an unbeliever who had made a career of attacking the Bible and arguing against Christian doctrines. The other was a Christian. The unbeliever was Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll, after whom the famous Ingersoll lectures on immortality at Harvard University are named. He died suddenly, his death coming as a terrible shock to this family. The body was kept in the home for several days because Ingersoll's wife could not bear to part with it; it was finally removed because the corpse was decaying and the health of the family required it. After some time the corpse was cremated, and the display at the crematorium was so dismal that some of the scene was even picked up by the newspapers and communicated to the nation at large. Ingersoll had used his great intellect to deny the resurrection, but when death came there was no hope. His relatives and friends received his departure as an uncompensated tragedy.

In the same year the great evangelist Dwight L. Moody died, but his death was a triumph for himself and his family. Moody had been declining for some time, and the family had taken turns being with him. On the morning of his death, his son, who was standing by the bedside, heard him exclaim, "Earth is receding; heaven is opening; God is calling." "You are dreaming, Father," the son said. Moody answered, "No, Will, this is no dream. I have been within the gates. I have seen the children's faces." For a while it seemed as if Moody were reviving, but he began to slip away again. He said, "Is this death? This is not bad; there is no valley. This is bliss. This is glorious." By this time his daughter was present and she began to pray for his recovery. He said, "No, no, Emma, don't pray for that. God is calling. This is my coronation day. I have been looking forward to it." Shortly after that Moody was received into heaven. At the funeral the family and friends joined in a joyful service. They spoke. They sang hymns. They heard the words proclaimed: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?...Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:55-57).

I do not mean to imply that the death of every Christian is equally glorious. Not all feel the force of these doctrines at their home going. But many do. Death can be victorious for a Christian. There is no hope apart from our Lord's resurrection."

- Exhortation

A wise use of exhortation -- a plea from our hearts to believe and obey -- can be a very effective conclusion. Yet, we must be aware of the dangers here. One danger is that you will move the people to respond by the power of your own emotion and communication skills. This can lead to spiritual abuse and manipulation. God wants each one of us to love and obey Him as a conscious decision of our wills. Another danger is that the power of our own emotional appeal can become ignored through overuse. If we constantly place emotional pressure on our hearers they will eventually "shut down" -- there is only so much they can endure. Emotionally balanced preachers nurture emotionally balanced believers and churches. Paul modeled that balance in Ephesus where with "tears" he "declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus" (Acts 20:19,21). No doubt the tears of the beloved Apostle moved these Ephesians, but they themselves needed to repent and believe.

Keeping these cautions in mind, do not be afraid to open your heart to people. Luke summarizes Peter's sermon at Pentecost: "With many other words he warned them, and he pleaded with them" (Acts 2:40). In a similar way, Paul revealed his heart for peace in the Church by saying, "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord" (Philippians 4:2). To those in Galatia who ignored his authority, Paul wrote, "I plead with you brothers...My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth...how I wish I could be with you now...I am perplexed about you!" (Galatians 4:12-20). So the great Apostles -- Peter and Paul -- show an example of pastoral exhortation in their preaching. Sometimes people need to see a model of God's love for them through our pleading.

Things to Avoid

- Saying "In conclusion..."

A great change in the meeting room occurs when the preacher speaks the words, “In conclusion.” You can hear people catch their breath. Many close their Bibles. Most look at their watches. Women pick up their purses and mothers begin to gather their children. People make a mental plan of their after-church activities. Eager anticipation of the luncheon meal overcomes many. In short, you have lost many people’s attention!

The wise preacher brings the message to a conclusion without saying the words, “in conclusion.” In fact, if he is creative, the ending is almost a surprise to the listeners. He manages to bring the message to a great ending without the people realizing the time has come. The best situation is when the people feel a disappointment that the message has come to an end so soon, because they have enjoyed it so much! Of course the length of sermons is also cultural. I remember the first time I preached in Africa. I presented a twenty-minute sermon. Twenty minutes of preaching was very culturally acceptable in my American church – in fact, it was appreciated. But the African pastor who invited me that day was not pleased. After I finished he stood in anger and rebuked me, because I did not love his people. If I did love them, I would have preached for at least an hour! Remember that Paul preached all night in Troas; but for Eutychus it was “deadly”! (Acts 20.7-12). So know the right to time to conclude.

- Saying “In conclusion...” and NOT Concluding

Something worse than saying the words “in conclusion,” is to say those words and then NOT finish. Because when you say those words, many people prepare themselves to leave. So they sit with their closed Bibles, and closed minds, eagerly looking at you with expectation of leaving. And they sit, and sit, and sit. The longer you go on, the more their disappointment in your message grows. All your hard work of preparing and preaching is ruined by their feelings of frustration. With the words “in conclusion,” you promised that they would soon be allowed to leave. Now you are guilty of not keeping your promise. They soon feel “trapped” in their seats! Of course, I am writing with the sarcasm of a time-conscious American. Most people are more forgiving than I have described. But my point is that you have worked too hard on your sermon to spoil it with a careless ending. Be careful in the choosing of all your words. Do all you can to advance God’s glory by preaching with effectiveness.

- Introducing a New Topic or Exposition

The conclusion is an ending, not a beginning. It is foolish to say, “We are almost finished, but let’s just turn to one more passage of Scripture.” With groans of disappointment they may turn, but that word “finished” makes people restless and eager to leave. Making this mistake is usually the result of poor preparation and organization. Recently I heard a preacher give a good sermon on “Faith” from Galatians. He explained the background of the text and made some very helpful applications for us as believers today. After about thirty minutes people began to tire. His point was well made and the challenge was driven home. Then, for some unknown reason, he took us back to Exodus for a study of Moses. (Not only was this a sign of poor organization, it was also evidence of theological misunderstanding. In Galatians, Moses is the symbol of Law, the *opposite* of faith in that context.) This “final point” about Moses lasted for another fifteen minutes, with no apparent connection to the message from Galatians. Listening to a well-organized unified message for forty-five minutes is acceptable.

Listening to a new fifteen-minute sermon after a satisfying thirty-minute sermon is agonizing! What may seem like a “flash of inspiration” to you at the end of your sermon may be God’s cue for next week’s message.

- Re-Preaching the Message

A brief review of your main points is helpful; a boring repetition of the sermon is hurtful. May God give you the wisdom to know the difference. One indication of the difference is the amount of detail repeated. Often the main theme of the sermon is explained by three “main points,” which are then divided into several “minor points.” Sometimes there are even “sub-points” of the minor points. Such structure is very useful as you preach the sermon. But to repeat all the details again at the conclusion is a mistake. It is enough to repeat just the “main points.”

- Apology

When I taught preaching courses in Uganda, almost every student sermon ended with an apology. Many disclaimers were made: “I am sorry that I did not have much time to prepare this message”... “There was not any paraffin for my lantern last night”... “My children cried so much I could not concentrate, so I do not really have much to say.” Their apology was partially a reflection of their “cultural humility.” Africans have a very attractive way of showing humility and respect. At best this humility reflects the image of God in their culture. But sin has distorted all our cultures. Sometimes we act humble only because we are proud. So we must clarify our apology.

Paul admitted to preaching in “weakness and fear, and with much trembling.” He added, “My preaching was not with wise and persuasive words.” But at the same time he was confident that his message was “a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but God’s power” (1 Corinthians 2.3,4). I have never been completely satisfied with any of my sermons. As I review my message, I can always think of the weak points. I know I could have studied more, prayed more fervently, organized my thoughts more clearly, added more or better illustrations, or finished with a better conclusion. Yet, notice that Paul did not “apologize” for the message, only for his imperfections as a preacher. It has been said, referring to the matchless message of God’s saving love in Christ, “You may find a better preacher, but you’ll never hear a better message.” We are to give our best effort in preaching this “best message” of the Lord. Our sermon is an offering to a Gracious and Mighty God. We trust Him to use it for man’s good and God’s glory. Be careful that your “apology” does not sound like a denial of God’s power. The power comes from the Word - the voice of the Lord:

“The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the Lord thunders over the mighty waters.
The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is majestic.
The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;
the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.
He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
Sirion like a young wild ox.

The voice of the Lord strikes
with flashes of lightning.
The voice of the Lord shakes the desert;
the Lord shakes the Desert of Kadesh.
The voice of the Lord twists the oaks
and strips the forests bare.
And in his temple all cry, 'Glory'"

Psalm 29.3-9

What Makes A Good Ending?

- People Want More

Rarely someone says to me, "I wish you would have kept preaching; I was ready to hear more." That kind of comment is a special encouragement, because you know that even with the imperfections of your message, God was really speaking through you. I pray that you will hear such comments often. May God enable you to preach His Word with clarity and power, that your people will have "ears to hear" with eager obedience. This is a sign of a "good ending." "I will bow down toward your holy temple and will praise your name for your love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and Your Word" (Psalm 138.2)

- You Accomplished Your Goal

At the beginning of your sermon you should have told your listeners your general plan. Have you done what you planned? Have you explained and applied your sermon text to the best of your ability? Have you sought to glorify God, build up His people, and reach out to the lost? If so, you cannot do much better.

There is a great sense of relief and release when you finish well. You have spent many long hours -- perhaps several late nights -- working on this sermon. You have struggled to preach it with power and clarity. People have received the message as God's Word for them. And now you feel a burden lifted from your shoulders. Of course, there is always some regret. The sermon never comes out exactly like you planned. You may have stumbled over some words, or forgotten an important idea. But I encourage you to trust that the "Master Preacher" said everything He wanted through you. You gave yourself and your sermon to Him as an offering of praise. Pastor Eric Alexander concluded his "Messages on Expository Preaching" by saying:

"There is really nothing in the whole world quite like the labor of expository preaching. It is utterly consuming. It may sometimes be utterly exhausting, sometimes utterly exhilarating, but it is the most glorious privilege in all the world. From time to time in the course of the years, I have found myself getting up from my study desk and walking around saying to myself, 'Fancy being paid for doing this!' And when you think of it, that is one of the great mysteries of life, because to be entrusted with the exposition of the Word of God to His people is a privilege beyond understanding."

So when you finish the preaching, relax and rejoice in Him for a few minutes. Then get busy with next week's sermon!

He is Listening

In 1990 I had the privilege of being invited by Bishop Maseri Kauma (Church of Uganda - Anglican) to preach at the Namirembe Cathedral in Kampala. The Bishop told me that the President of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, might attend. When I arrived that Sunday, I found that the President was not able to come. I was relieved, because I questioned whether my sermon was worthy of His Excellency. After a wonderful time of worship in the huge cathedral, the Bishop invited me to climb the pulpit to speak. Then, just as I began, he motioned for me to stop. The President had come! Everything stopped as the Bishop went down the Cathedral's long aisle to meet the President, his wife, and their children. He and several leaders escorted the First Family to the front row. As the thousands in the building stood in awe and curiosity, the important visitors sat down just a few meters in front of the pulpit. Then I was invited back up to speak. I was quite nervous, yet it was a privilege to preach to the leader of the nation and his family. It was an even greater joy for me to hear his message after mine – a moving testimony of faith in Jesus.

That will probably be the only time in my life that I am asked to preach to a Head of State. But I realize that Someone more important listens to me, and to you, every time we preach. He is always present in the Church that meets in His name (Matthew 18.20). In 2 Timothy, the Apostle Paul exhorts his son in the faith to "preach the word" (2 Timothy 4.2). His charge applies to us as the modern messengers of this Apostolic Gospel. Notice the preface to the charge Paul gives: "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus...preach the word" (2 Timothy 4.1,2). The Most Excellent God and His Holy Son Jesus are in the front row. They are listening to your every word. Their joy and glory is when you exalt Them through your message. Never forget that They are there. Never be content with poor preparation or powerless preaching. Give Them your best! It is because They are listening that it is an awesome privilege to preach.

Appendix A: Preaching for Funerals

Preaching and conducting funeral services is one of our most difficult tasks. Yet, this time of death is an important opportunity to proclaim God's hope and comfort. Let us consider how to make these solemn occasions fruitful for the kingdom of the Living God.

“Where can I look for help?”

The death of a loved one is a staggering blow; even the strongest person can be driven to their knees in shock and anguish. At such times even competent people, who seem to always know what to do, become completely lost and confused. Believers who have never doubted God before are filled with questions and complaints. At such a difficult time, people desperately need confidence and hope. They look in many directions.

Some look to the “comfort” of alcohol to strengthen their broken hearts. There they may find a temporary peace, but after its effects have passed, their problems are even bigger. And because alcohol is really a chemical depressant, the drinker is taken down, not up. Such a false solution is neither useful nor morally acceptable for the believer in Jesus.

Many people look to religion. Some Muslim background believers look to the guidance of the Muslim Mullah. For some, these leaders have been fixtures throughout their lives. Their prayers and rituals have marked the major steps in the life of their family. From birth, through circumcision, into adulthood, marriage, and even at death, the Mullahs have always given the right words of guidance, direction, and peace. At a time when “nobody knows what to do,” the Mullah knows the prayers and rituals that promise to bring blessing to both the living and the dead. Many new followers of Jesus find it easier to look back to the security offered by Islam during times of death, sorrow, and confusion. “The Mullah,” they reason, “has always known what to do at a time like this.” Even some pastors look to the Mullah for their direction at this time of sad confusion. Muslim background believers who look back to their past life feel safe and comfortable. This looking back is very understandable, but it is not acceptable for the believer in Jesus.

God of the Living

To follow Jesus is to look forward in faith, through all of life and death. “We live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5.7). We believe in a God we have never seen. We follow a Jesus we have never touched. And we will live forever in a heaven we have never visited. This life of faith is the life of God's blessing. As Jesus told Thomas: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed” (John 20.29).

The temptation of some Muslim background believers to “look back” to Islam is similar to some early believers who looked back to their Jewish heritage when they faced great difficulty. The book of Hebrews was written for a similar situation. The author gives many warnings against “turning back” to their old religion, rituals, and way of life. In Jesus we have seen God's “signs, wonders, various miracles, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.” So the writer asks those who are tempted to drift away, “How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?” (Hebrews 2.1-4). Later, he exhorts these tempted believers to “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be

hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first" (Hebrews 3.12-14).

Our sinful hearts can be deceived often. We can find it easy to make bad decisions and to offer false excuses. We might argue that we really need to follow the Mullahs and their Islamic rituals during this time of death. "This is what our people have always done," we think. "To be a Kazakh is to be a Muslim." "I know what the Mullah can do for our family during this time of burial. How can I trust the believers at this critical time?" It is easy for us to "look back;" it was also easy for Lot's wife. She had lived a happy and secure life in the comfort of Sodom. There was happiness and joy for her there. "Surely God did not expect people to go out and live in caves anymore, now that we have our own great city," she may have reasoned. So she gave just a small glance back at her sweet home of Sodom. But this glance was a slap in the face of God, open defiance of His expressed command, a symbol of unbelief in God's promise and protection, and a preference for death over life. This "small mistake" had a shocking result. "Lot's wife looked back and became a pillar of salt" (Genesis 19.26). Jesus knew this was a real event and warns us, "Remember Lot's wife" (Luke 17.32). There are no "small sins" when it comes to turning our backs on Jesus -- in life or death. Those who do so are "not fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Luke 9.62). In fact, the first group of sinners who will be cursed with the second death are "the cowardly, the unbelieving" (Revelation 21.8). Blessed is the believer who does not look back, and is not ashamed of Jesus, in life or death.

How can Muslim background believers resist the strong pressure to look back during the time of death? After all, they hear the deceitful convincing cries of their own sinful hearts. They are threatened by the alienation of their own grieving family members. And they fear the attacks of the Islamic people in their village. No believers can stand by themselves at such a difficult time. The passage in Hebrews holds a key to our strength -- "encourage one another daily" (Hebrews 3.13, cf. 10.24,25). The writer had solid hope for these struggling believers: "But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved" (Hebrews 10.39). It is Jesus who is our Shepherd. He holds us in His powerful hand; He will keep his sheep safe eternally (Hebrews 13.20,21). It is our duty to encourage one another with words of His hope, and the promises of His power. We encourage one another daily through the faithful preaching and sharing of God's Word. When the believer has proven that God can be trusted through all the days of His life, he can have confidence in God for the day of his death.

A pastor friend of mine recently received the unexpected diagnosis that he has cancer. Of course, this was no surprise to our Heavenly Father. The next Sunday, the cancer victim stood with courage to preach in his church. His text was Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd." During the next weeks, as his pain and suffering intensified, he continued teaching his people -- and himself -- the precious promises of that Psalm. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Psalm 23.4). We believers need to give this encouragement to our brothers and sisters every day: that our Father God can be trusted with all our life, now and forever. When someone has this confidence, they will not turn to empty religious rituals, or the escape of alcohol; they will know the joyful presence of the Spirit of God in times of tears and laughter. During the emotional crisis of death, we can rarely teach people what to do, because their minds are clouded by their grief. We are to preach and encourage them through this life so that they

will be ready for death. In this way they will remain faithful witnesses to the True God always.

A Solid Rock

So, my brother preacher, my prayer is that you will be a faithful stable model for your people in life and in death. It is not easy to show confidence and faith in the face of death, especially the death of someone dear to us. But it is at these critical times that you need to call upon the Lord, to strengthen your confidence in Him. The Mullah knows what to do at the time of death -- do you? People will not lean upon a weak and doubting leader when they need support. "Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees, and make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed" (Hebrews 12.12,13).

Jesus teaches that there is a solid rock upon which we can build our lives and ministries -- the Word of God. Let the storms of life come, even death itself, our house will stand upon His firm foundation (Matthew 7.24-29). It is the preacher of the Gospel who offers hope to the grieving. Through our message the Lord says to them, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you...For I am the Lord, your God" (Isaiah 43.1-3). When we preach the Good News of Jesus, especially in a time of great sorrow and confusion, we are lifting high the banner of the Lord, so that people might know the way they should go. "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: 'See I will beckon to the Gentiles, I will lift up My banner to the peoples; they will bring your sons in their arms and carry your daughters on their shoulders...Then you will know that I am the Lord; those who hope in Me will not be disappointed'" (Isaiah 49.22,23).

Specific Reminders

Here are some specific things to remember as you minister to people during times of death and sorrow:

1) Preach to the Living

This seems quite obvious, but it can easily be forgotten. There is nothing in Scripture that says the dead are present at their own funerals. We have no basis to believe they can see or hear what occurs in the world of the living. Our bodies are like cheap "jars of clay" and temporary "tents" which will someday be "destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4.7,5.1). At death our spirit is "away from the body" (2 Corinthians 5.8). There are only two final destinations for the dead and "a great chasm" has been fixed between these eternal homes, "nor can anyone cross over" this impassable divide (Luke 16.26). According to Jesus, the time of our journey to our eternal home is the day of our death: "Today" (Luke 23.43). So the dead person cannot hear our "good-byes" or our sermons. "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Hebrews 9.27). Our task as preachers is to preach to the living people who gather to mourn their departed. And as we preach to these living sinners, our goal is that God would replace their "dead" unbelieving hearts, and make them alive in Christ.

2) Preach with Emotion

You are a person and not a machine. If the deceased is someone you loved, it will be very difficult to compose yourself and present your thoughts. If they were too close to you, like a member of your own family, you may have to ask someone else to preach the sermon. But if God gives you the grace, do it yourself. I still remember a brother pastor's powerful message that he preached at his own son's funeral. We all wept with both pain and joy. We knew that young boy had gone to be with Jesus. But the pain cut deeply into our hearts. I preached funeral sermons for my father and grandfather. It was very hard. But I was thankful for the opportunity to share Jesus with the members of my family.

The shortest verse of Scripture reveals the tender heart of our Savior: "Jesus wept" (John 11.35). These tears were on the occasion of the death of His friend Lazarus. Jesus did not "grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4.13). Yet, Jesus wept, even though He planned to raise Lazarus from death (John 11.38-44). Jesus knew that death for the believer is a defeated enemy, because He is the Resurrection and the Life (John 11.25). Yet, death is still a terrible enemy. I have heard preachers make very insensitive comments at funerals. We do not thank God for death, or celebrate death. We thank God for life, and celebrate "the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1.10). We preach a Jesus who is omniscient -- but we preachers do not have all the answers. Before we open up our Bibles to those who mourn, we must first open up our hearts to them. "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12.15).

3) Preach God the Righteous Judge

Charles Swindoll, an American pastor, has said there will be three surprises for us in Heaven; first, who is there, second, who is not there, and third, that we are there! I have preached at funerals of dear brothers and sisters in Christ. Through my tears I have been able to say with joyful confidence, "This brother has gone to be with Jesus!" My confident speech was because I witnessed their faith and works in Christ. Sometimes as a pastor I preached funeral sermons for people I never knew. Occasionally I preached at services for hostile critics of the gospel. At those sad moments I wished I could "preach them into Heaven." But it was too late.

But I remembered that only God knows with certainty who is in Heaven. I could preach with confidence about the destiny of true brothers or sisters in Christ. Yet, I did not speculate about the destiny of those I did not know. It was NOT my duty to pronounce that a person had gone to Hell. (Although I believe that anyone who rejects salvation through Jesus is condemned.) I am not "Hell's gatekeeper." I am privileged to announce that in Jesus, Heaven has been opened. The Apostle Paul finished the gospel race and kept the faith. As such he could say, "Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day -- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for His appearing" (2 Timothy 4.8).

So the task of the preacher during the funeral is to preach this loving God to the living. If you knew the departed, it is appropriate to say some word of remembrance. But it is a time to be honest. Once a member of the Mafia came to see a preacher. "My brother, also a member of the Mafia, has been killed. I need you to preach during his funeral. I beg

you, please, say that my brother was a SAINT!” The preacher struggled with how he could honestly say these words of praise. This was his solution: “Today, we have come to remember a terrible man. He was a thief. He beat people. He killed people. But compared with Adolph Hitler, he was a SAINT!” But this joke is not meant to distract us from the serious point of our duty. We are not to preach sinners or saints, but about a Savior, the Righteous Judge, the Lord Jesus Christ. People will not be saved “by comparison” with other sinners, but through grace, and by faith in Him.

4) Preach Hope and Comfort

Because our task is to preach to the living, we can preach hope and comfort with confidence. Only God knows where the dead have gone, but you know where the living can go. If they receive the Jesus you proclaim, they have the right to become children of God. If they repent of the sins of this world, they will receive a citizenship in Heaven. If they deny their home on earth, they can have an eternal home in Heaven.

There is one thing each of your listeners has in common with the deceased -- they too will die. So this gathering of the “future dead” is filled with uncertainty and fear. If your message is just a remembrance of the dead, there is little reason for hope. This is especially true if you praise the dead; people may think you are teaching salvation by “good works.” Heaven is a home for saved sinners, and this means there is hope for everyone, because everyone is a sinner. Indeed, the “chief sinner,” Paul, tells us “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Timothy 1.15). This same forgiven Apostle said, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15.13).

5) Preach Briefly

A funeral is a unique opportunity for the gospel. In Hawaii I pastored the oldest church in our small city. Many families thought it was prestigious for their departed loved one to have their funeral in our church. It was not unusual for government officials, business leaders, and other leaders in the society to come into our church for a funeral. I remember thinking; “This is my only time to share Jesus with these people.” It was a great privilege. At those moments I was tempted to really give it “all” to them. Something deep within me thought, “If they are only coming to church once, then it is my duty to tell them everything they need to hear about God, no matter how long it takes!” This was one “still, small voice” which was NOT from God.

Think of the thousands of people who had only one chance to hear Jesus preach. He made no attempt to present a complete systematic theology to these curious seekers. More often, He told one powerful story, gave one provocative thought, or asked one challenging question. Once, the American author Mark Twain wrote a long letter to a friend. Toward the end of that letter, Twain wrote the following apology: “I am sorry this letter is so long, I did not have time to write a short one.” Any preacher can ramble on and on. The wise preacher carefully plans what -- and what not -- to say each time he preaches.

Take the time to plan your funeral sermon very carefully. There will be people present who will never hear the message of salvation again. There will be people present who have never heard the Good News of Jesus. They need a cup of the water of God’s grace; they

cannot drink from a gushing fire hose. I recommend that your funeral message be about fifteen minutes in length. In order to do this properly, your Scripture text, your topic, and each point must be carefully chosen. Like ancient warriors who carefully cut, shaped, and crafted their arrows, the modern preacher should take special care in the preparation of a funeral message.

As you begin to craft this sermon, you must first select your Scripture text. Your purpose, as always, is to explain and apply the text of God's Word. But those who come are not anticipating detailed exegesis or complex interpretations. Many of them are completely unfamiliar with Scripture. Many are so emotionally stressed they cannot think clearly. Some of them may be drunk. Yet, this is all the more reason to give them God's Word. Our emphasis should be on a simple explanation and application of Scripture. Clearly explain the meaning of the text as if you were speaking to a child, because in truth many of them will be spiritual infants. Then drive the main point home to their hearts with stories, exhortations, and applications -- big windows to help them see into the house of God's truth. In the outlines that follow, I suggest some cross-reference texts that support and explain the points of the sermon. These passages should be shared from memory, or written in your notes. *It is never wise to turn from passage to passage in your Bible as you preach, especially during a funeral.* If you do so, you will lose the concentration of your hearers more easily. Keep the message simple and the focus on one main text of Scripture. Look into their eyes and preach it.

The fact that my funeral sermons were brief did not always mean that the services were brief. This was especially true when many others wanted to share in word, song, or prayer. Many times I felt that my short sermon would be "washed out" by all the other words. Sometimes there were Jehovah's Witness family members who got up to "preach" their lies. Sometimes there were Buddhist priests who preached and prayed. Some people preached, sang, and danced praises to the "ancient gods" of the Hawaiians. Some of the funerals were like "religious carnivals!" If I was only preaching my own ideas I would have really been worried. But I did not feel it necessary to attack the wrong ideas that were spoken, sung, or prayed. Those sad occasions were not the time for religious debates. My confidence was in the Lord and His Word. As the fresh milk is churned, the cream will rise to the top. Heaven and earth will pass away; God's Word will endure forever. My duty was to prepare, preach, and pray. God will use His Word to accomplish His purpose. What God did for His servant Samuel, He can do for his preachers today. "The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and He let none of his words fall to the ground" (1 Samuel 3.19).

Your hearers should clearly hear that they must face this Righteous Judge who you proclaim. God commands that they repent and believe (Acts 17.30). You, as His servant, must tell them of His love and saving grace. True preaching of the gospel is always Good News. You may feel led to invite people to receive Christ at the close of your message. If you sense that it is not proper to do so then, at least clearly explain how they can receive Him later. Make sure they know that you are always ready to talk with them about how they can receive the gift of God's salvation. It does not take a long time to clearly share these truths. Your well-planned brief sermon should shine a clear light of truth, hope, and mercy amidst the fear, confusion, and sadness of the occasion. Then when the meeting ends, greet the people and give them time to ask you about spiritual things if they wish to do so.

Suggested Funeral Sermon Outlines

There are many wonderful Scripture texts that give comfort, hope, and challenge in the funeral setting. The whole Bible proclaims life, hope, and salvation; it is easy to find appropriate passages. Here I will share a few outlines from passages that I have often used for funeral sermons.

Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life John 11.17-27

This passage is a good one for showing that the Lord Jesus is both God and man. Begin by explaining His friendship and love for Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary. Everyone can relate to this situation. Jesus was so close to this man that He wept at his death (11.35), which is something many of us have also done. But we see that Jesus is more than a good man; He is also a great God. He has power to raise the dead.

1. Cry of the Broken Heart v. 21 -- "Lord, where were you?"

Martha speaks the words which many people feel: "Where was God when we needed Him?" This is often how those who have lost loved ones feel.

2. Question of God's Care v. 22 -- "You could have done something!"

She knew God had given Jesus all power. Why didn't He use this power on behalf of her brother? "Why didn't you ask Your Father? Don't you care?" Of course, we know that Jesus did care for Lazarus, and His sisters. Not only does He care, He has the power of life.

3. Claims of Tradition vs. 23,24 -- "I know...last day"

Martha repeats a traditional religious slogan: "Things will be better someday in the future." She interprets Jesus' promise (v. 23) as an empty slogan, not a statement of present faith. Many people fall back on their old traditions, religions, and superstitions as a way to help them cope with the crisis of death. But only a house built on Jesus the Rock will stand.

4. Marvelous Promise vs. 25,26a -- "Resurrection and Life"

Jesus has life in Himself (John 5.26). He is God, the self-existent "I AM" (John 18.6). His life will never end (Acts 2.24). He can give this life to "whoever lives and believes in Me." Not only does Jesus promise eternal life, He shows His power over death by the raising of Lazarus (John 11.38-44).

5. Challenging Question v. 26b -- "Do you believe this?"

It is not enough to just hear the promise of God; we must believe and receive Him (John 1.12). "Do you believe this?" As a preacher, you must be bold -- ask people this direct and eternally important question.

6. Correction Confession v. 27 -- "Yes Lord, I believe"

We must believe in the person and work of Jesus. Who is He? -- The Son of God. What will He do? -- Die and rise to life as the Messiah. It is not enough to recognize that He is a prophet, or good teacher. He is Lord and God, and He saves as the Lord God. There is "another Jesus." (2 Corinthians 11.4) Are you sure you know and believe the true Jesus of the Scriptures? If so, you have the "Resurrection and the Life!"

Why Do People Die? Romans 6.23

1. The Reality of Death -- "the wages of sin is death" (see Romans 5.12)

Do not be surprised -- all people are destined to die; not just the person remembered at the funeral, but all the people gathered here today also.

2. The Reason for Death -- "sin" (see Romans 6.21, Genesis 2.16,17)

Every crime carries some punishment; the crime of sin is punished by death. Sinners have broken their relationship with the Life Giver.

3. The Redeemer from Death -- "Christ Jesus our Lord" (see Romans 7.24,25)

Only Jesus has conquered death, He is risen! Here is the main point of your message. Make it clear that He is the Lord and Life Giver. Present several biblical examples, illustrations, and testimonies.

4. The Release from Death -- "the gift of God is eternal life" (see Romans 8.38,39)

The punishment of sin is earned, like wages earned for our work. But salvation cannot be earned, it is completely free and undeserved, it is a gift from Him who defeated death. How are you relating to God? Is He a "boss" who you "work for" and thus expect payment? If so, you will be lost, because His standards and expectations are perfect. Are you perfect? Thank God imperfect sinners like us can come to Him and find grace. "God helps those who cannot help themselves." God gives us what we do NOT deserve -- mercy and free salvation. Come receive this gift!

"A Home Prepared" John 14.1-6

This passage brings great comfort today, even as it did to the disciples who first heard these words from the Lord Jesus.

1. Heaven is a Real Place -- v. 2 "if it were not so, I would have told you"

Have you ever been to New York City, or Moscow, or Beijing? If not, how do you know these places really exist? Because you know people who have been there -- trusted people -- and they have told you. Just because you have never seen these places does not mean they do not exist. Heaven is a real place. It is not a mythical fable. How do we know? We know because Jesus came from there to tell us about it. We can trust His testimony. (John 5.36,37).

2. Heaven is Our Real Home -- v. 2 "In My Father's house are many rooms"

In this life we often move from one place to another. Many times we look back at the place we were born, or the place we were married, as our real home -- even though we may live somewhere else. And when we have occasion to return "home" it is very special. The feelings of joy and reunion are wonderful. Heaven is our home; we have a Father and Elder Brother there, and we have a house there. We will live there forever. (Philippians 3.20,21).

3. Heaven is Now Prepared for Us -- v. 3 "I go and prepare a place for you"

Where was Jesus going after He spoke these words? Within a few hours He would be nailed to a cross. Heaven was "prepared for you since the creation of the world" (Matthew 25.34). Jesus was not going to decorate Heaven. He was going to remove the one obstacle that keeps us out of Heaven -- our sin. Sin's punishment must be paid and the wrath of God must be satisfied. Only then can we be prepared to enter Heaven. Praise God that Jesus died and rose from the dead! His resurrection proves that the debt of sin has been paid. Heaven is prepared, and Jesus' death and resurrection has prepared us to enter.

4. Heaven Is Entered by Faith -- v. 1 "Trust in God, trust also in Me"

The way that we receive Jesus' gift of forgiveness is through faith (Hebrews 11.1,6). Faith is a verb; it is an act of trust in someone greater, and a denial of self. Faith is invisible, but it is made visible by the choices we make and the words we speak. True faith has fruit as its evidence. One illustration is when we sit on a chair. It is possible to think that a chair will hold our weight. But it is only when we -- by faith -- sit down on that chair that we prove our belief. Likewise, the sad moment of death is a time to show faith. Who do you trust? "Trust in God, and His Son Jesus"

5. Hope in Heaven Drives Away Fear -- v. 1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled"

One of the fruits of our faith is confidence. Fear and faith cannot live together; one will drive the other away. Ask God to give you faith. Ask God to increase your faith, especially at this time of fear and crisis. Ask Jesus to calm your troubled hearts; trust Him. Are you still filled with fear? Then perhaps you need to receive Jesus as your Savior and Lord today.

Jesus Is the "Mahdi" John 5.24-30

Islamic tradition speaks of a "Mahdi" who will oversee the judgment of mankind at the last day. This same Muslim tradition, not the Quran, says that I'sa (Arabic for Jesus) is the Mahdi. How interesting that this tradition is quite similar to what the Bible teaches in John 5.24. Through this verse the Preacher can answer the question, "How can we receive eternal life?"

1. Hear -- "whoever hears My word"

Jesus asks us to listen to Him. Jesus even enables us to listen. We cannot do so on our own. In fact, since we are "spiritually dead," we refuse to listen. Yet, He speaks of a time when "the dead will listen." He is speaking about when the Holy Spirit gives a person "ears to

hear” the Word of God (Revelation 2.7,11, 17, 29). As you prepare your message, pray that God will open ears, and even raise the dead!

2. Believe -- “believes Him Who sent Me”

The Bible teaches that new life in Christ comes through faith (Ephesians 2.8,9, Hebrews 11.1,6). Here Jesus makes clear that saving faith is in the true God, “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 1.3). We believe in the Father and His Son, Jesus. These words also refer to Jesus’ mission, what He was “sent” to do. Jesus explains that His mission was our salvation. And He was successful in this mission; our salvation has been accomplished. Jesus said, “For I have not come from heaven to do My will, but the will of Him who sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that I shall lose none of all that He has given Me, but raise them up at the last day. For My Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6.38-40). What a great promise of life and hope you can preach to those who mourn the death of their loved one! Make it very clear that this promise is received through genuine faith -- “believe”!

3. Live -- “has eternal life and will not be condemned”

What a terrible pronouncement: “Condemned”! This is to be guilty, to be found at fault, and to be set apart for punishment. Many who listen to your message are under this condemnation -- “whoever does not believe stands condemned already” (John 3.18). People may do many things to deny their guilt and cover their wrong doings. We may make many excuses, and blame everyone else. But in the final day, we will stand before the Just and Holy God. And then none of our excuses or good works or religious rituals will be enough to lift God’s just condemnation from our shoulders. Only Jesus can do this. He lifted the heavy cross of our sin, and suffered God’s condemnation on our behalf. (John 3.17, Romans 8.1).

4. Now -- “he has crossed over from death to life”

Notice that eternal life begins at the moment of faith. Believers in Jesus gain this life when they trust Him as their Savior. This is because Jesus is alive. He paid the penalty for our sins. He suffered our condemnation on the cross. And three days later, He rose from the dead. Our sin’s penalty has been paid. God, our Judge, declares us “Not Guilty,” “Not Condemned”! This life is ours -- now and forever -- when we put our faith in Jesus.

* * * * *

I hope these outlines and the instructions about our preaching ministry during funerals will be helpful in your ministry. I am sure as you study the Scripture and carefully apply it to your own situation, you will develop some excellent funeral sermons of your own. Such sad times can be the beginning of life, hope, and joy, as people meet the living Jesus. May His name be praised!

Appendix B: Preaching for Weddings

All of life is a gift from God -- and the transition points of life are often when people are most aware of Him. Weddings are strategic opportunities for the preacher to share the Word of God. Before the wedding ceremony occurs, you should teach the couple the biblical meaning and requirements of marriage. I recommend you insist on meeting with the couple before you consent to perform their wedding. During this time you can clearly share what God requires of them as husband and wife.

Weddings: Secular, Religious, or Christian?

When I meet with a couple that plans to be married, I explain that there are three types of weddings: secular, religious, and Christian. A government official performs a secular wedding. Religious practitioners from many traditions perform a religious wedding; some of them are “Christian.” A Christian wedding is a public ceremony where Jesus Christ is acknowledged as Lord and giver of life. In a Christian wedding, the couple exchanges vows of faithfulness in the presence of the Lord and a servant of His Gospel - it is a “Christ-centered” wedding. The words spoken are not just generally religious, but Christian truth. A Christian leader is needed to conduct a Christian wedding. It may be possible to have a “Christian wedding” even when the couple is not Christian, if they have agreed to have a Christ-centered ceremony. It is the leader of the ceremony that determines its message and direction. After I explain the three types of weddings, I say that I only conduct Christian weddings. Many times in my experience, the couple has had no religion at all. Yet, they are often happy to have a Christian wedding. Usually a Christian friend or family member sent them to me in the first place. Unfortunately, most couples are more concerned about dresses and dining (and drinking), than their ceremony and vows.

Different pastors have different convictions about performing weddings. One conviction every pastor should have is not to marry a Christian with a non-Christian. This “mixed” couple violates God’s command, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 6.14ff). We have all witnessed the pain and misery in homes and hearts when one spouse follows Jesus and the other refuses. A pastor should never compromise in this area. But Scripture is silent, in my opinion, about performing a marriage for two unbelievers. I choose to do so for the sake of the Gospel. At those times when unbelievers turn to God and His Church for help, I want to be there for them. When I first meet with the couple I share my testimony of faith in Christ. I tell them how He has blessed my wife and I in our Christian marriage. I have always found the couples eager to listen and learn. One pastor I know got into a big problem in this first meeting. It was a “good” problem, because the unbelieving young man received Christ during this first meeting. But the young woman, who happened to be the daughter of a church member, refused to believe. Now the pastor had to tell this couple that he could not perform their wedding - because he could not join a believer to an unbeliever. You can imagine that the young woman and her mother were not very happy. I thank God for my brother pastor who made a clear stand for the integrity of the Gospel. As you prayerfully consider whether or not to conduct weddings for non-Christians, may God guide you, “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Romans 14.5). There is much that could be said about pre-marriage counseling, but my focus is on preaching in the wedding ceremony.

Jesus Brings Joy to the Wedding

Jesus attended a wedding ceremony at Cana in Galilee (John 2.1-11). We do not know the couple, or even whether they believed in Him. Perhaps his mother was close to the family, possibly helping in the kitchen (v. 3). We know that “Jesus and his disciples had been invited to the wedding”(v. 2). The Lord Jesus was a person of joy. People wanted Him to be with them, even on their special day. No doubt there was some behavior at the wedding that did not please Jesus. A typical Jewish wedding lasted seven days. I am sure they drank real alcohol wine, not grape juice! Yet, a Jewish wedding was not a Roman orgy. There were strict rules against immorality and drunkenness. But no matter the sinful conduct that may have occurred there, Jesus accepted the wedding invitation. Truly He was a “friend of sinners” even while he remained “without sin” (Matthew 11.19, Hebrews 4.15). I pray that you, as a servant of Jesus, will have such a kind heart. Even though you are called to confront sin, may you have compassion for sinners. May they know that you love them, even if you do not approve of everything they do. Jesus went to the wedding to demonstrate God’s glory and mercy for sinners.

When they invite you their wedding, I hope they ask you to preach. As in any setting, your task as a preacher is to explain and apply the Word of God. But, as I wrote about preaching at funerals (Appendix A), this is a unique preaching opportunity. Many people will be strangers to God and His Word. Your message should be brief, clear, and simple. Beware of using “church language” and theological terminology. You want to compliment, but you do not want to compromise. You want to offer them happiness and hope. But as God’s Ambassador you must emphasize that these blessings are found on the path of faith and obedience to the Gospel. This is a new beginning for husband and wife - challenge them to begin with God. Extend the promise of God’s presence and provision for those who follow Him. Tell them that Jesus is not just to be a “visitor” at their wedding ceremony, but their Savior, Lord, and Friend for all this life - and the next. He wants to be the Master of the home they are establishing. At this time when man and woman are looking for “true love,” tell them that the fullness of truth and love are found only in the Lord Jesus.

All Eyes on the Bride

The main difference between preaching in the church service and the wedding is the prominence of the sermon. In church, the sermon is the centerpiece of the service. In the wedding service, the vows exchanged – which are Bible-based promises – hold prominence. It is your duty to write the vows or borrow them from Christian sources. It is appropriate that the focus of attention is on the wedding couple; from the moment they enter the meeting place, to their exit. The wise pastor does all he can to place them in the center of the ceremony. Since the vows communicate the Biblical message, it is not absolutely necessary to have a wedding sermon. Although, a brief sermon helps those present to more fully consider God’s claims over all of life. In most cases the couple expects the Pastor to structure the wedding ceremony. So, telling the couple that a short sermon is part of your “Order of Service” will usually be gladly accepted.

Preaching or Poetry?

It is important that you explain, especially if the couple is not from your church, what you plan to do. Some couples would rather have a poet than a preacher in their wedding

ceremony. And this is their choice; after all it is their big day. Poets are very appropriate spokesmen in secular and religious weddings. A poet speaks man's words of beauty and good wishes. They compliment, flatter, and amuse. Their presence in a wedding may add to the dignity and drama of the ceremony. But the preacher has a different calling. He is called to speak God's Word, for His honor and pleasure. This does not mean that the preacher should be insulting and undignified during the wedding. No, your presence in the wedding is a sign of God's love and concern for the family. Your message should convey God's desire to bless them -- as they begin their marriage, and for all eternity in Christ.

Evangelistic Purpose

The wedding ceremony should have an evangelistic purpose, but it is not an evangelistic service. Surely we want both husband and wife to be saved. Indeed, we want this for all those present. Remember that the family and friends of the couple will also be present. We should not hesitate to tell them that they must receive Jesus as Savior and Lord. Yet, the focus of the ceremony is the promise the man and woman make to one another in the sight of God. This is their "big day," as families witness this passage of their children into adulthood. So be very sensitive to all those involved. You are to uphold the Lord and His Word and to respect these families. If you are overly aggressive in evangelism, you may erect barriers to future relations with them. Instead, build bridges with love and respect -- without compromising the Gospel. May your words be in the power of the Lord Jesus, of whom we read, "the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching" (Mark 11.18).

Sample Wedding Sermon Outlines:

"Love - The Most Excellent Way" 1 Corinthians 13

Believers and unbelievers love this beautiful passage of Scripture. I have heard many words of appreciation when I read this text in the wedding service.

1. The Necessity of Love vs. 1-3

The Corinthians had many religious experiences. But all of those experiences are empty without love. Without love your marriage will not succeed. You will give one another many wonderful gifts, but the most essential gift is your life long love.

2. The Nature of Love vs. 4-7

Paul lists several characteristics of love; it is not intended to be an exhaustive definition. The positive characteristics are patience and kindness. Then he lists eight things that love is NOT - envious, boastful, proud, rude, self-seeking, easily angered, remembering wrongs, delighting in evil. Then he lists four things love should ALWAYS do - protect, hope, trust, persevere.

3. Never Ending Love vs. 8-13

Love is more lasting than anything in this world. It is even more enduring than our religious activities. God has brought you to a new day - becoming man and wife. Someday we will

enter the new day of seeing “face to face.” Until that final day, your love for God and one another will keep you.

As you close your brief sermon, substitute the name “Jesus” for the word “love.” He is God’s love in human flesh. He is the ultimate example of love. Tell them that in Jesus alone you will find this perfect love -- from God for you, and your spouse. “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4.9,10). If the couple knows Jesus, they should put their own names in the place of the word “love” in this text. Because the believer is to display this kind of love, with God’s help.

“Finding a Wife from the Lord” Genesis 24

Isaac was the special child of blessing given to Abraham and Sarah. Through him the family of God would grow and the promises of God would be fulfilled. So it was necessary that Isaac’s wife be a special woman. The Christian today is also a child of promise; we too have received the blessing of Abraham (Galatians 3.14). God also desires that the spouse of the believer be a special person. (This chapter is probably too long to read during the wedding service. It would be good to “tell the story” during your introduction, reading just a few selected verses as you preach the sermon.)

1. God’s Standard vs. 3,4

Abraham insisted the child of promise have a spouse who would please God. He needed to be united with a woman from within the family. It was difficult and expensive for this spouse to be obtained. It would have been much easier to pick a girl from where they lived. No doubt there were many beautiful and intelligent women in their area. Nevertheless, God’s standard is not always the easy way of doing things.

Abraham is the spiritual father of the believer in Jesus (Galatians 3.29). God’s child in Jesus has the same standard today. Our spouse must also be from the family of faith. “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 6.14). We have all witnessed the pain and misery in homes and hearts when one spouse follows Jesus and the other refuses. Marriage is a gift from God and must be kept according to His standard.

2. God’s Guidance vs. 12-14, 48-50, 66

It seems that Rebecca was right there waiting for Isaac. From God’s perspective, as the story was written, it was this simple. God does all things well for His children. As the couple stands before you on their wedding day, you can trace the clear way that God brought them together.

But as you narrate the journey of Abraham’s servant you should explain that it was long and difficult. There were many hills and valleys between Isaac and Rebecca. Many long and lonely nights separated them. The call to follow Jesus is a long obedience in the same direction. We must place our hope and confidence in Him to give us what we need when we need it. He is never late. He is always right on time. “Every good and perfect gift is from

above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like the shifting shadows” (James 1.17).

3. God’s Blessing vs. 60, 67

Abraham sent his trusted servant on this long journey with confidence. This hope was forged through the long faith journey he had taken himself. God’s blessing had kept him all along the way. He knew this grace would sustain his servant who sought a wife for the chosen son. This son was the fulfillment of God’s promise. His future was secure. His posterity was foreordained. His marriage, and all his life, was an evidence of God’s certain blessings and faithful promise.

The Lord Jesus is the true Son of Abraham (Galatians 3.16). All those who are in Christ are sons and daughters in this blessing (Galatians 3.14). Indeed our entire walk of faith is characterized by “one blessing after another” (John 1.16). So this special wedding day is one example of God’s blessing. As this man and woman love one another, and their children, all the days of their lives -- the blessings multiply. Entering into faith in the Son of Abraham, like entering into this marriage covenant, is the entrance into God’s promise of blessing. “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8.32).

“The Best Wedding Guest” - John 2.1-11

Jesus attended a wedding at Cana in Galilee. His presence at our wedding - in our lives - means great blessing. Happy is the couple that has the Lord Jesus in their wedding.

1. Invited Guest

Today there are many special friends and family members gathered to witness your vows. Each one is here because they have been invited. Have you sent an invitation to the Lord Jesus Christ? Perhaps in all the busyness of your preparation you forgot to invite Him. This couple in Cana did not forget to invite Jesus and his disciples (v. 2). Jesus is a gentleman, not a “party crasher.” He told the church in Laodicea, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3.20). He is not like the Big Bad Wolf who huffed and puffed and blew the house down. He asks us to receive Him by faith (John 1.12).

2. Involved Guest

Jesus’ mother found that this couple was in great need! To run out of wine was not just a social embarrassment, it was an offense punishable by a fine. Mary asks her son to “get involved.” His answer was polite yet firm. He was not just her son, He is also her Sovereign and Savior. He hesitates getting involved because to do so would begin the death march to the cross. Notice how John’s Gospel links the word “time” to the crucifixion (7.30, 8.20, 12.23, 17.1). Yet, He did get involved. He turned water held in jars for Jewish ceremonial washing into the best wine. As a Rabbi he knew that now those jars would be “ceremonially defiled.” They could never be used in Jewish ceremony again. But this was why he came. He replaced the water of the Old Covenant with the wine of the New. He ends the shadow of ceremony with the reality of full and final forgiveness. Jesus is not just to be a “visitor” at your

wedding. He has come to be “involved” as your Savior, Lord, and Friend for all this life - and the next. He wants to be the Master of the home you are establishing.

3. Impressive Guest

Not everyone present at the wedding realized that a miracle of God had occurred “in the kitchen.” Indeed, the master of the banquet is shocked that this couple would bring out the best wine last (vs. 9,10). Yet, God allowed some of those present to see and understand the glory and power of His Son, and they put their faith in Him (v. 11). Even at this wedding there are some who have “eyes to see” and “hears to hear” the Living God in our midst. May all those who do so also put their faith in Him.

“Marriage - A Creation of God” Genesis 2.18-25

Today many people think of marriage as only a social relationship, or an ordinance of the government. But the Bible teaches that marriage - like man and woman - is a creation of God. If we want to know how marriage “works,” we should consult the “Owner’s Manual.” Since God is our maker, then His Word is the best place to discover how to live with His blessing on our marriage. From the first marriage we learn three important truths about the marriage relationship.

1. Marriage is the Ultimate Relationship for Man and Woman

v. 24 *“a man will leave his father and mother”*

The spouse is to be the most important person in this world for the married person. This “leaving” represents a break from the control of mother and father. Also, the spouse is more important than children, employer, and other friends.

2. Marriage is a Permanent Relationship for Man and Woman

v. 24 *“and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”*

The marriage relationship is to last a lifetime. Society may accept divorce but God hates it (Malachi 2.16). God does not hate divorced people, but He hates the terrible consequences which divorce brings to the couple, their children, and the society. The two - man and woman - became one in marriage; much like Father, Son, and Spirit are one. Together the man and woman fully reflect the image of God (Genesis 1.27).

3. Marriage is an Intimate Relationship for Man and Woman

v. 25 *“The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.”*

The marriage is where man and woman share with one another at the deepest level. The marriage is the place where the social, spiritual, and sexual needs of the partner should be the concern of the spouse. This intimacy must be protected by trust and faithfulness. It is only with the power of the Risen Jesus in our marriage that we will be able to maintain this deep, intimate love for a lifetime.

“Three Essential Ingredients in a Good Marriage” from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians

This message requires brief comments on each text, interpreting them clearly and applying them to the wedding couple. Today you will receive many wedding gifts from friends and family. God has many wonderful gifts for the two of you on this day, and all the days of your life together.

1. God’s Salvation 2.8-10

God’s most precious gift for you – and all gathered here -- is the gift of salvation through Jesus. With this gift He removes the penalty of sin we deserve to pay, by paying its full price for us on the cross. God the Judge becomes God the Savior and declares us “Not Guilty” in Christ. The gift of salvation benefits you for all eternity. Paul makes clear that salvation is a gift from God. Our loving God gives this freely to all who firmly trust in Him.

2. God’s Spirit 5.18-21

The gift of salvation includes the gift of the Holy Spirit. When the Lord Jesus ascended into heaven, he received the “victory prize” of the Spirit for His obedient death and resurrection (4.8). By His Spirit we have power to glorify God in all we do, and submit to one another in love. Ask God to fill you with His Spirit daily.

3. God’s Strength 6.10-13

Sometimes married life is very hard. There are stresses and challenges that you will face. But do not fear. The Lord Jesus, by the power of His Spirit, is with you always. So as you live with one another “be strong in the Lord.” Fight to keep your marriage strong. Fight against selfishness and temptations that may try and divide you from one another, and the Lord. Stand in the Lord and the strength of His might, that as a couple you will be faithful soldiers of His Kingdom.

* * * * *

Perhaps these simple outlines will be useful to you as God gives opportunity to declare His Word in weddings. I pray that in these special opportunities – and every time you preach – He will bless your efforts with great eternal results. May He be glorified in us and through our message.

Appendix C: Sermon Evaluation Form

Four Basic Assumptions:

1. Preachers can always improve their ability to interpret and explain the Scriptures (2 Timothy 2.15). Even preachers are called to be humble and teachable, like a child in God's Kingdom – especially preachers!
2. Good expository preaching involves both accurate interpretation and careful explanation of the text of Scripture (1 Corinthians 2.1-5, 2 Corinthians 4.1-5).
3. Believers who hear the preached message are able to evaluate it (Acts 17.11, 1 John 2.20).
4. The wise pastor seeks the advice of spiritual leaders to help him improve his ministry. Sharing with them evaluation tools like this form may prove helpful to all. May we be like Apollos who “spoke with great fervor” yet was open to the counsel of Priscilla and Aquila who “explained to him the way of God more adequately.” After their counsel, Apollos’ ministry was even more effective (Acts 18.24-28).

This form evaluates two parts of the message, the interpretation of the text and the delivery of the message.

Part 1: Interpretation (exegesis)

1. The preacher has understood and explained the main meaning of the sermon text.

What is the main idea the Holy Spirit is speaking through the human author of the Scripture passage? Has the preacher explained this central theme of the text in a simple sentence? Does the rest of the sermon build on and develop this main theme? For example, if the text is John 3 the main idea would be the “new birth;” sermon points may be: What it is? What it is not? Where does it come from? How do we get it? What are the benefits? Etc.

2. The preacher has explained how the text connects to its immediate context.

All of Scripture is related because it has the same Divine Author. Each book has a consistent theme because of its human author. What has gone before? What follows? In our example of John 3, John 2.25 says Jesus “knew what was in man.” So Nicodemus is fully known by Jesus, even a great teacher of Israel needs a new birth. Chapter 4 is a similar personal conversation about eternal life, with a Samaritan woman. This fits the overall purpose of John's Gospel: “that by believing you may have life in His name” (John 20.31).

3. The preacher has explained the historical and cultural setting of the passage.

Each Scripture text was spoken for a particular time of redemptive history to a specific audience in a particular situation. What was going on at the time of this text? Without this knowledge it is not possible to understand its true meaning. In John 3, Jesus has recently begun his ministry; he has performed his first miracle, and cleansed the Temple. The Jewish community had been wondering about this man (verse 2). Opposition against Him has begun

and will grow until He is “lifted up” (verse 14). In John 3, Nicodemus, the Teacher of Israel, wonders how Jesus fits into God’s Messianic plan.

4. The preacher has helped the listener to understand the key words of the text.

The preacher must first know these key words. Usually they are words used often in other parts of the same book of Scripture, and the entire Bible. They are also words that add important insight into the meaning of key Bible themes. For example, “new birth” is a key word in John 3. It is not used very often in Scripture. But it is a key theme of Scripture, for without this “new birth” a person will not see the “Kingdom of God.” Other important words in chapter 3 that are found throughout John’s Gospel are “sign,” “truth,” “spirit,” “testimony,” “believe,” “life,” and “light”.

5. The preacher has explained the author’s purpose in writing this passage.

What did the author want his readers to do/be in response to reading this message? This requires knowing the reason why the text was written. John makes his overall purpose of the Gospel clear (20.31) and chapter 3 is an illustration of the necessity of the new birth for eternal life, even for religious leaders.

6. The preacher has shown the best way to interpret Scripture are with other Scripture.

(This is also called the “analogy of Scripture.”) The Bible is its own best commentary. Has the preacher shown the continuity and development of the whole message of the Bible? For example, John 3.14 refers to Moses making a bronze snake to cure the deadly snakebites the Israelites received. As they looked in faith, they were healed. Since the Garden of Eden, Scripture reveals the serpent as an enemy of God’s people. Like the Old Covenant believer looked with faith to the upraised bronze serpent, today life and healing come from the cross of Christ. Destroying the serpent will be part of the believer’s ultimate victory in Christ (Romans 16.20).

7. The preacher carefully explains the important theological truths of the passage.

Doctrine is the application of Scripture to all areas of life. What does this text teach about the person of God? Of Jesus and His work? The Holy Spirit? Of salvation? The sermon is not to be a lecture on systematic theology. But it is to explain the text and its meaning, which is the centerpiece of theology. John 3 has much theological truth about the Kingdom of God, salvation, judgment, and the ministries of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

8. The message of salvation was clearly explained.

Any Biblical text can lead a sinner to salvation. The overall purpose of Scripture is to give us “wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3.15). The Gospel message should be clearly developed from the given text; not a second sermon preached at the close of the service. Look for great truths about God revealed in the text. Perhaps you may see His character and how we do not measure up to it, or His grace and mercy so freely given, or His Kingdom established by His Son, or His judgment and how we must be ready. Realize that your sermon may be the only chance an unbeliever can hear how to be saved. John 3 is an easy text to call sinners to repentance and faith. Jesus emphatic words in verses 3-5 stand for

all time and all people. The preacher must passionately make known the necessity of the new birth.

9. The preacher's application of how to respond is directly taken from the text itself.

When the preacher is the pastor it is always a temptation to try and make the sermon text speak to the problems that face the congregation that week. Yet, do not "twist the Scripture" to make it say what it you want it to say. John 3 has many practical applications here are a few:

- Jesus and His Word are the only source of truth and salvation
- Human "birthrights" and religious attainment are no certainty of salvation
- The testimony of Jesus was rejected - ours may be too
- The most wonderful expression of God's love is Jesus
- The world has already been condemned
- We are to shine God's light in the world's darkness
- God's ultimate and eternal judgment is the only evaluation that really matters

The preacher's task is to faithfully make known God's Word, He will apply it to the hearts of His people in many wonderful ways; much better than we could do ourselves.

10. The preacher has explained what the text means to people today.

John Stott speaks of sermons as bridges from the text to today. A good sermon has solid connections to both the ancient text and the modern world. The good sermon sounds both like a history book and a daily newspaper. The listener should know clearly that their reception or rejection of this message would have tremendous consequences. John 3 speaks to the "search for truth" in our era, the wrong emphasis we make on external religious activities and rituals, the darkness of human evil in our world, and the light of God which shines, no matter how faintly, and cannot be extinguished.

Part 2 - The Delivery

1. The preacher effectively communicated a single main idea.

There should be a concise sentence, spoken several times during the message, which conveys what the preacher is trying to communicate. Listeners should be able to walk away repeating that main idea. The points of the message should build upon and develop this main idea.

2. The arrangement of the material is logical and easy to follow.

The sermon is crafted as a declaration from God based on a particular text. Sometimes the preacher may present his points in slightly different order from the sequence of the text. Sermons are not always "running commentaries" going from one verse to the next. Yet, the logic of the presentation must be clear and consistent with the text.

3. The meaning of the text is clearly communicated.

The text of Scripture was presented and adequately explained so that the listener knows the main themes of the passage. The Scripture was not just a “springboard” from which the preacher soared into the currents of his own hot air! Instead, it was the source and foundation of the sermon. Because of this sermon, the listener learned the central teaching of this text for their Christian growth and understanding.

4. The main idea of the text was effectively illustrated.

Illustrations are the “windows” of the sermon. Carefully chosen illustrations help to reveal the meaning of the text. Illustrations are powerful. Care must be taken that their influence be used to actually open the meaning of the text, not just entertain listeners or exalt preachers. The connection between the illustration and the text must be very clear.

5. The preacher’s style and choice of words is clear, simple, personal, and direct.

The style and presentation should help to communicate the message; it must not be a distraction. The choice of words and tone should fit the theme of the sermon. Words should be simple, warm, and direct. Every listener should be able to understand.

6. The preacher has made an effective use of voice inflection and gestures.

Find the balance between being monotonous and overly animated -- somewhere between calling attention to oneself and calling people to give full attention to the text. Gestures and facial expressions should enhance and adorn the message. Watching a videotape of the preaching is always a good learning experience for the preacher. (And scary too!)

7. The preacher preached to himself and the congregation.

Being under the authority of Scripture means that it applies as fully to the preacher as to any listener. The preacher is a “fellow struggler” on the King’s Highway. The testimony of the preacher must be genuine and not forced or false.

8. Having heard this sermon, I know clearly what God demands of me through this text.

The whole purpose of the sermon comes down to this; that God’s people would do/be what the text requires. The message and its delivery must be so constructed that this goal is achieved. You are not just informing; you are calling for a life decision.

9. Having heard this sermon, I can identify at least one area of my life that must change.

The attentive listener should be able to make personal applications from the message. The sermon should include specific ideas for change and growth in the Lord. The Holy Spirit often shows individual believers particular areas where change is needed.

10. The sermon helped me to expand my thinking and knowledge as a believer.

Each sermon builds on the listener’s foundation of acquired Christian knowledge. The good sermon reinforces, expands, opens up new ways of thinking, raises new questions, and

challenges accepted opinions. The wise preacher rejoices when the congregation grows in their ability to “think for themselves” according to the principles of Scripture.

These 20 aspects of the sermon, 10 relating to the content and 10 to the delivery, should provide a balanced evaluation of the message.

Who should be chosen to evaluate the message?

1. Men and women who are growing and mature in their relationship with Jesus and their knowledge of Scripture.
2. Men and women who have heard a number of different preachers.
3. Men and women who are not strongly opinionated; they will be honest and fair in their evaluation.
4. Men and women with a passionate vision for God’s glory to be revealed in His Church.
5. It is ideal when at least four different people evaluate the message and then have time to consult with one another afterwards to strengthen their analysis of the message.
6. It is ideal when the evaluators can then meet with the preacher at a convenient time and share their ideas in a relaxed atmosphere of love, respect, and mutual edification.

Part 1: Interpretation (exegesis)

1. The preacher has understood and explained the main meaning of the sermon text.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

2. The preacher has explained how the text connects to its immediate context.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

3. The preacher has explained the historical and cultural setting of the passage.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

4. The preacher has helped the listener to understand the key words of the text.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

5. The preacher has explained the author's purpose in writing this passage.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

6. The preacher has shown the best way to interpret Scripture is by using other Scripture.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

7. The preacher carefully explained the important theological truths of the passage.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

8. The message of salvation was clearly explained.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

9. The preacher's application of how to respond is directly taken from the text itself.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

10. The preacher has explained what the text means to people today.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

Part 2 - The Delivery

1. The preacher effectively communicated a single main idea.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

2. The arrangement of the material is logical and easy to follow.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

3. The meaning of the text is clearly communicated.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

4. The main idea of the text was effectively illustrated.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

5. The preacher's style and choice of words is clear, simple, personal, and direct.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

6. The preacher has made an effective use of voice inflection and gestures.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

7. The preacher preached to himself and the congregation.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

8. Having heard this sermon, I know clearly what God demands of me through this text.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

9. Having heard this sermon, I can identify at least one area of my life that must change.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

10. The sermon helped me to expand my thinking and knowledge as a believer.

1 2 3 4 5

Reason/Example:

Other comments about the sermon:

Appendix D: My Expository Sermon of 1 Timothy 2:8-15

“Take Your Places!”

Pastor Mark Blair

July 27, 2014

1 Timothy 2:8-15

1 Timothy 2:8-15 ⁸I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; ⁹likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, ¹⁰but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works. ¹¹Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. ¹²I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. ¹³For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. ¹⁵Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control. I am writing these things to you so that...you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for our time of worship today. What beautiful songs we have lifted up to your great and glorious name. We pray now that as we turn to your Word, you will open our hearts and our minds. I pray, Father, that the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together will be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As we have studied this letter of Paul to Timothy, we have understood that these are commands given by an apostle to a bishop about how the church should believe and behave. Chapter one has emphasized the foundation of what the church thinks, and now

we are studying how the church conducts itself. It is the first importance of the church to worship the Lord. These verses specify exactly what the roles of men and women are in the service of worship. In chapter three, Paul will say:

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth. 1 Timothy 3.14,15

The rest of the letter is basically a working out of the relationships between leaders and members, men and women, rich and poor, widows and families, and how the church is to conduct itself regarding these relationships.

Introductory Comments on the Roles of Men and Women

1. Popularity

We've come to some controversial verses, and I am going to begin with introductory comments because we need common ground before we come to the text. This is a topic that is popular around the world; one that the denominations that many of us come from make pronouncements about at their annual meetings. Most denominational pronouncements are ignored by the world. What a denomination says about men, women, and gender issues, however, will make headlines in print or pixels around the world. You can bet on it! People that do not even care about a church will want to know what that church says about this issue.

We have all the elements here for a great drama, first with the stiff, old, male-dominated, conservative, traditional institution called the church. The Pope himself has said that 2% of the leaders of his denomination could be pedophiles, so we think: "Wow, that thing needs to change." Into this institution, on a white horse, come the women. They get it, and they are sensitive and empathetic. They can understand what those stodgy old men will never figure out. The media plays all this very well. You can take the woman off the white horse and put homosexuals on the white horse, and they are equally praised for understanding it and getting it, because for the world, this is a justice issue. This is an issue of freedom. It is an issue of civil rights. We must have fairness in this world. Many rejoiced this month when the Church of England finally said that women can now be bishops. I was listening to BBC that day and they said, "Now that they allow women bishops, the Church of England can perhaps claim to be an equal-opportunity employer." (BBC News, 14 July 2014) Yes, this is a popular issue. It is also an issue we need to approach humbly.

2. Humility

I've been married for 32 years to a wonderful woman, and I still can't figure her out. I'm from California; she's from Hawaii. Even more, she's from Venus, and I'm from Mars. We are really different. Proverbs 30.18-19 says:

Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a virgin.

The roles of men and women are an amazing, curious and complex reality. I think that's why Paul began this chapter with verse one:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people.

We must first go to our knees and try to figure out before God how to understand these things. This humility is necessary in all our study of Scripture.

3. Superiority

"Is this a question of superiority?" Many people think it is, but the Bible has no place for either chauvinism or feminism. In fact, a man who once was a chauvinistic, mono-cultural, self-righteous Pharisee said in Galatians 3.28:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

How in the world did he reach that conclusion? He went to the cross. He realized there is neither Pharisee nor publican who can stand before the living God. We are all equally bad in the sight of a holy God. There is no superiority; in fact there is unity in the church. In Philippians 4:2-3, Paul commends his sisters in Philippi this way:

I entreat Euodia, and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

I have taught preaching classes in several countries for several years, and I hate to admit it, but usually the best preachers in the class are the women. They are more verbal, more spiritual, more faithful, more sympathetic, and they get it when the men often do not. But 1 Timothy is about the church. It is not about the business world; it is not about the state. The Bible commends Lydia, who was a businesswoman. The Bible commends Deborah, who was a leader of state. Both of them were under the blessing of God. If you are considering whether to vote for a woman in your country's elections, 1 Timothy two has nothing to say about that question. It is only addressing the situation in the church.

4. Priority

What is the mission priority of the church? The gospel of Jesus Christ for everyone! That is why we are here. Paul says,

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. 1 Timothy 1.15

The supreme priority of the church is for people to know the love of God in Jesus Christ. The world is watching us! Let us not allow pigheadedness and lovelessness to prevent them from hearing about his love. In a similar way, Paul, in a pastoral letter to Titus, commands slaves:

Slaves are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior. Titus 2:9-10

5. Authority

The fifth thing we need to realize is that the Bible is the authority of the church: that is why this letter was written. Paul says this about the church in I Tim 3.15:

...if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth.

The Bible is the standard in the church in Ephesus, and in this church in ZhongGuanCun.

In 1975, I was a college student and a new Christian who was excited about my faith. One of our pastor's seminary professors was an occasional Sunday night preacher in our church. I remember the night when that professor addressed 1 Timothy chapter two. He reached a significantly different conclusion than I am going to reach here. There was a question and answer time afterward, and someone raised their hand and said, "Dr. Jewett, what you said doesn't seem to jive with what Paul said." He quickly said, "Paul was wrong!" This man was a nice and learned guy, but I never saw Dr. Jewett again because he never came back to our church. Our church believed that we could not take scissors to the Bible, nor was it a wax nose that we could turn any way we wanted. In fact, Paul says here to Timothy:

...remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine. Timothy 1.3

I saw many denominations switch to embracing women leaders decades ago, and now I am seeing those same denominations embrace homosexual leaders. The hermeneutic they used to justify the first has opened the door to anything.

a) Rigid Literalism?

The authority of the Bible is significant. It is our standard. Having said that, how do we interpret it? It is an old book, written long ago to people in far away places. Many people would say that we need to be rigidly literal about this book. "God said it, I believe it, that's enough." To a point this is a commendable idea. Men, I noticed many of you did not have your hands up when we prayed. Why not? And women, I noticed some of you wearing a little gold, some braided hair, and some jewelry. Take it off!

Maybe it is not that easy to apply the Scriptures rigidly and literally.

I once wrote a book on preaching that has been published in the Russian language. After its publication I was invited by a seminary professor in Kazakhstan to come speak at their school, which is part of a very conservative Baptist denomination. The president invited me into his office before I spoke and gave me a warning.

“Be careful,” he said, “Some of those people have read your book and are angry about what you said because we take a very literal interpretation of 1 Timothy two.”

So, I asked him, “What kind of tape do you use?”

“Tape?” he asked.

“Yes, to put over the ladies’ mouths when they walk into church.”

He said, “We don’t use tape!” and I asked, “So when they walk in, can they say, ‘Hello?’”

“Of course they can say ‘Hello!’”

“Can they sing a song?”

“Yes.”

“Can they give a testimony?”

“OK.”

“Can they read a Bible verse?”

“Well, yeah.”

“And in the course of reading it, could they explain about what it says?”

“Yes.”

I said, “Brother, you have women teaching men in your church.” He had to think that through.

b) Polite Respect?

The other extreme of Biblical interpretation would be having just a “polite respect” for the Bible. Such a person appreciates the ancient wisdom and beautiful literature of Scripture. Ultimately, though, the person thinks: “Come on, let’s understand that in the first century, they didn’t know much. We are twenty-first century scholarly people who know about modern science and genetics and gender studies and sociology.” One commentator says, “Just as the first half of this chapter showed us the author at his best, so the second half seems to show him at his worst. Christians are under no obligation to accept his teaching on women.” (A.T. Hanson) This attitude toward Scripture becomes much like going to your grandparents’ house. You keep your mouth shut, you listen politely to everything they say, and then you walk out the door not planning to do any of it. Another commentator that many of us may have read, although I do not encourage you to read him very often, says “All things in this chapter are mere temporary regulations to meet a given situation.” (William Barclay) Their attitude is that we are a little too sophisticated for Paul and “that old stuff.”

So, how do we interpret this Bible? There are rigid literalists who would keep the baby and the bathwater. Then there are polite respecters who would throw out the baby and the bathwater. But I am suggesting we be faithful Christians who keep the baby, but change the bathwater.

Rigid Literalist – Keeps the Baby and the Bathwater

Polite Respector – Throws Out the Baby and the Bathwater

Faithful Christian - Keeps the Baby and Changes the Bathwater

To keep the baby and change the bathwater is nice slogan. How are we going to do that? To answer, we must go back to I Timothy two.

1. Looking Good – In the Sight of God

1. Man-Pleasing

a) Religious Men

There were problems in this church in I Timothy. They were looking good in the eyes of men. Those men looked great. You saw them all raising their hands in worship. They were religious men. Look at verse 8:

I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling.

Many people come to church to look good, don't they? They come to be seen, and the same was true here in I Timothy. The reality was that these guys had dirty hands. Even worse, their hearts were dirty, and that is what Paul was most concerned about. You see, it is hypocritical to lift up your hands in worship when there is something wrong between you and someone else, or between you and God. In fact, Peter will talk to husbands and say this in I Peter 3.7:

Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

There is a connection between what you do in your marriage and what you do in your prayers.

2) Revealing Women

So this church had religious-looking men, but there were also revealing women. Verse 9 tells us:

...likewise also that women should adorn themselves with respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire...

Warren Wiersbe says, "Ephesus was a wealthy commercial city, and some women there competed against each other for attention and popularity." There is nothing new under the sun here. Sex sells, whether in the first century or the twenty-first century, and it is pleasing. I confess, as a sinful man, it is pleasing to me more often than it should be. But when I look at my sister, I ask, "Are you trying to arouse *me* or edify *me*? You ought to be seeking God when you put on clothes." You ought to say, "This is what I want to wear when I stand before God," because you *are* standing before God.

b. God-Pleasing

1) Reconciled Men

In verse 8 we see these men who are without anger and disputes: or at least they should be. That should not only be the condition of their hands, but also the condition of their hearts in being right with God. Jesus describes in Matthew:

If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5.23,24

So if we have a prayer meeting, our primary concern should not be what we should wear, but how we are ready to appear before him, keeping our relationships with God and with men and women in good order.

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. He will receive blessing from the LORD.
Psalm 24.3-5

2) Respectable Women

For women, verses 9 and 10 describe how

...women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works.

If you don't want to be treated like a sex object, don't look the part. But notice in verse 9, it says, "Women should adorn themselves." I love the comment of a bachelor who has said,

"Paul recognizes both that women are beautiful and that they should increase and exhibit their beauty. There is no biblical warrant in these verses for women to neglect their appearance, conceal their beauty or become dowdy and frumpish. The question is how they should adorn themselves." (John Stott)

We want to see the purity of both men and women before God.

If we consider the concept of the baby and the bathwater, what do we keep and what do we throw away in these verses? In the case of men, holiness, peace, letting go of anger and quarreling: all those are eternal. Whether your hands are up or down, or even in your pockets, is not really the issue as you approach God in prayer. Similarly for our sisters, it is the inward more than the outward fashions that are important.

	Men and their Prayers	Women and their Dress
“Baby to Keep” Biblical Commands	Have holiness, love, peace Stop anger & quarreling	Have inner beauty, purity, modesty, Edify those around them
“Bathwater to Change” Cultural Forms	Lifting Hands	Gold, Braids, Jewels

We need to be aware of what pushes people’s buttons. I have preached many times in rural African churches, and the front row was a sea of women’s breasts. Now, I do not think they had them out for me; they were feeding their babies, but it did make me focus more on the back row in my preaching! When we went to Hawaii, women were wearing shorts which were sometimes much too short. I saw lots of legs. But in Africa, I did not see any legs because, as African brothers told me, “It is erotic to show those legs!” I do not always know what pushes people’s buttons. So the question is, are you looking good in the sight of God and in the sight of man?

2. Listening Well – To the Message of God

It is also important to consider whether or not you are listening well to the message of God. The most important piece of furniture in the church of Jesus Christ is the Bible. That is why in chapter four Paul will say to Timothy:

Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.
1 Timothy 4.13

But it seems that in this church in Ephesus something had gone wrong. There is commotion, as we see in verse 11, and Paul rebukes them, telling the women to be quiet.

a. Commotion

Now, we don’t know exactly what was happening or who was to blame. We read these verses quite differently depending on the period of time in which we live. If you are a twenty-first century woman, you are going to read that verse and say, “What? Women can’t teach?” If you are a first century woman, however, you would say, “Wow! Women can learn!” because in most first century settings they could not. So in this early church, which was divided by gender like the synagogue or a mosque, only without a wall or a curtain, some commotion was going on.

Paul is writing this from Corinth, across the Aegean Sea, and interestingly, that church was in a similar upheaval. We read in 1 Corinthians 14.33-35:

God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

Now remember, these letters are like one side of a phone call. We only hear part of the conversation. We do not fully understand what was happening on the other side, but we do know that if anything is wrong in the church, it is the elders' responsibility. This is because, as we will see in chapter three, the elders are the overseers. They are the ones charged to bring order in the church. Somehow, women speaking in these two congregations seems to have brought upheaval.

b. Calling

To see what the prohibition of speaking for women means, we need to step back. We will look at the big picture of the Bible and the calling of women. In the first century, the Roman culture and the Jewish culture allowed very few opportunities for women. In fact, there was great prejudice against women. Jesus was counter-cultural. We see him in the gospel of Luke moving around with twelve men and a group of women.

Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means. Luke 8:1-3

That must have looked quite strange to people then, and verse 3 tells us that these women were paying the bills. So the women were significantly involved in leading, assisting, and advancing the work of the gospel.

1) Sharing the Word

If you are a woman, you should love the writings of Luke. Luke tells us more about women than any other Bible writer. He tells about the virgin Mary, about her cousin Elizabeth, about a prophetess named Anna who was faithful in the temple, about a teacher named Priscilla, and about Philip who had four daughters, all of them prophets. In Luke fifteen there are pictures of God, and one of these pictures is of a woman who lost a coin and searches it out, in essence implying a description of God as a woman!

Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently till she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Luke 15:8-10

When all the men ran away from the crucified Savior, the women stuck around and became the first to preach the resurrection. There are many other examples in the Bible where women preach and teach the Word of God. You would not be reading 1 Timothy

or 2 Timothy if women did not teach. Paul recognizes the influence of Timothy's mother and grandmother on his faith in 2 Timothy:

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well...But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 2 Timothy 1.5, 3.14,15

Even this bishop, Timothy, is to continue his learning from the godly women in his life.

In Titus, Paul speaks to older women:

Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children. Titus 2.3,4

So women, put down the bottle! Pick up the Bible and teach it. As they teach it to women it ripples over to men, to children, to the world as you are faithfully teaching the Word of God.

In Acts eighteen, we read about a couple in this church in Ephesus:

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and explained to him the way of God more accurately. Acts 18.24-26

Luke is radical in naming the wife before the husband: Priscilla and Aquila. Priscilla is the woman! They come to a gifted teacher named Apollos, who had preached a great sermon but missed a few things. Instead of going home, sitting around the lunch table, and talking behind Apollos' back about everything that was wrong with his sermon, they took Apollos to lunch! They said, "Apollos, we'd like to explain the way of the Lord a little more accurately to you." Priscilla led the way as her husband supported her.

Paul also says:

...but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. 1 Corinthians 11.5

Now this is a huge chapter, but I want to highlight a particular point here. The Corinthian church had a head problem. Men had something on their heads when they were not supposed to. Women did not have anything on their heads, but they should have. They were all mixed up. They were discombobulated in their authority structure because men are designed to be the head of the relationship in the church and in the family. Paul reminds us, "Hey, you Corinthians, the prostitutes wear their hair down, so the married, dignified women put their hair up." I think the head covering is simply the

hair of these women who are acknowledging their faith in their God: but the head covering is a bath water issue today.

2) Sermons during Worship

Notice in verse 5 that women in the church were praying and prophesying! Does Paul say to stop it? No! He just says, "Hey, make sure you're doing it in the right way. Make sure you have the right authority structure for that ministry." So why in chapter eleven is he fine with this, but three chapters later in chapter fourteen, he says "Keep quiet!"? Because it is not just a matter of sharing the Word, it is a matter of preaching the sermon during worship. 1 Corinthians fourteen is the chapter about how to love one another in a worship service, and verse 26 shows that it is participatory.

When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. 1 Corinthians 14.26

Different people take part in the service. There should be no interruption. There should be unity. There should be no speaking out of turn. There should be an order to all of this. He says in verse 29:

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said... the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission..." (1 Corinthians 14.29,34)

This instruction is for when prophecies, some of which are spoken by women, are shared. At that time, it is the elders of the church who will give the pronouncement as to their faithfulness. Women are silent on that evaluation.

Therefore, what I am doing right here, right now, in the preaching, applying, and explaining of the Word to the gathered congregation for our normal meeting is the job of men. It was the job of men in the church in Corinth and it is the job of men in the church today. That is why verse 12 in our text says:

I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.

Teaching and having authority are two different activities. There are overlaps, especially when you are teaching as I am right now. I pray you are not indifferent to the Word of God. It is not enough to think, "Oh, that's interesting. Oh, that's cool." No, it is more than interesting. It is more than cool. You must do something - it is the Word of God - all of us must ultimately obey. So women prophesy, pray, exhort, sing, lead small group, teach classes, all under the authority of the elders and their husbands if they are married.

What is happening at this moment, though, as the gathered church is listening to the applied Word of God, is the job of men. It is the time in which God's Word is explained, applied, and impressed upon the congregation in an ongoing, intentional, authoritative, instruction of God's Word to God's people. If you want to teach motorcycle maintenance, go ahead. If you want to teach piano, go ahead. If you want to teach the Bible, go ahead. But in this setting of weekly formal worship, women are not to teach the Bible. Men are

elders, as you will hear next week, and the elders supervise the preaching. So there should not be, in my understanding of the Bible, women serving as bishops, as pastors, as elders, or even as preachers in Sunday services. Now some of you will say, "That's ridiculous. Everybody's doing it." They are, and I realize that I am a voice from the distant past, but I am not trying to please the world. Some people have asked, "Well, can't we, like, once a year have a woman preach?" and I have replied, "Well should the men use the women's bathroom once a year? Wouldn't that be cool?"

c. Creation

This is what the Word of God says. Why does it say it? Two reasons are given. The first is creation. Verse 13 reminds us that Adam was formed first, then Eve. That means this is relevant not only to the first century, but to the twenty-first century, and beyond. That means it is not a matter of culture or custom, but a matter of creation. There is something about our wiring from God that made us this way. Men's leadership is not a result of the fall, but is a part of creation. It is very good in the eyes of God. Why? Honestly, I do not know. Why do birds fly? Why do women have babies? Why am I here as a preacher? I do not know. I think of Paul's words to the Corinthians when he said:

It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.
1 Corinthians 1.21

Why God allows an old fool like me to stand here and talk to you, I do not know. For some reason that is the way he has designed it. On many levels, this world is created with structure. There are governments, militaries, businesses, organizations, families, and churches. We live in a world of structure, and that is just the way God has made it.

This is not teaching that all women must submit to all men. Nothing says that. Women submit to the king, the elders, their husband (if they have one) and nobody else. We are all standing before God together, so it is not a matter of intellect, ability, purity, effectiveness, faithfulness, or compassion: it is simply the teaching of God's Word. The order in which God has placed us has nothing to do with value. We are going to read about parents and children, rulers and subjects, men and women, husbands and wives, all of them equally valuable in the eyes of God. Leadership in the church is not supposed to be about power, although sadly, it often is. It is really supposed to be about dying; about giving your life away for the sake of the gospel. It is supposed to be about telling the world that 2,000 years ago, a man was nailed naked to a cross, and by that death we are saved. The folly of the gospel is what we are commanded to live and die for.

d. Culpability

Then Paul mentions culpability in verse 14:

Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

Please understand that verse 14 is not a compliment. It is a statement of fact. Eve was deceived. How do we know that? Read Genesis! She says it!

"I was deceived." Genesis 3:13

She got the wool pulled over her eyes by the serpent. But Adam, wide-eyed, fully aware, having heard the commandment of God and its consequences, willfully rebelled against God. There was no deception there, just an attitude: “I’ll do it,” and he did. He disobeyed God fully knowing what that revolt meant. So in verse 14, Paul is saying that the whole structure went crazy. Adam and Eve, who were made to rule over the animals, have now submitted themselves to a creature in the garden. Eve, who was created to help her husband, now leads him into sin against God. Adam, who was designed to protect his wife, passively stood there while the serpent talked to the woman and just watched her eat the very thing that God had said not to eat. Finally, both of them just stood there and let that creature trash-talk God. They essentially said, “Whatever.” They should have beaten that lying serpent with a stick!

So in verse 14 Paul reminds all of us that we live in a fallen world. The whole order of creation was turned upside down. Was Eve inherently more gullible? Was she more naive, foolish, or weak? Absolutely not. If that were true, she could not have been declared “very good” by our Creator God. She was as bright, capable, and gifted as any man. In fact, she is so capable that Paul commands she teach in the right settings under God.

Fallen men have taken leadership to two crazy extremes. On the one hand, we abuse it. Sadly, there are a lot of people who even use the Bible to abuse their position in leadership. That is horrible! But the other crazy extreme is that we are absentees. We went A.W.O.L. We are not taking up our responsibility. Both of these, abuse and absenteeism, are an abomination in the sight of God. Paul is simply saying, “Get it together, church! Remember that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, whether their name is Adam or Eve, to put things right again.”

e. Comfort

Paul ends with what I think is a word of comfort in verse 15:

Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.

The reality was that most women in Ephesus were going to get married, and most married women, would have children. But there is danger in childbirth because of the curse in Genesis three:

To the woman he said, ‘I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.’ Genesis 3:16

At that point of pain in childbearing, there is a curse. Many first century women died in childbirth, or suffered immensely, or received wounds that meant they could never have another child, or a normal sexual life. There was no anesthesia, there were no sutures, there were no spinal blocks, antibiotics, or anesthetics. And still child birth is not easy, even in the twenty-first century. So perhaps women are thinking, “God is my curser.” But what Paul is saying to the Christian women in Ephesus, and throughout all time, is that you will be saved through childbearing.

Now please do not think that Paul means having a baby gets you to heaven. If that were true, there would be a whole lot of women in heaven. It is not having a baby that gets you to heaven. Rather, in Christ, you will safely pass through childbirth on your way to heaven. As a cross reference, consider 1 Corinthians 3:15, which says:

If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

It is not childbirth or fire that saves you. Those are what you are saved through. You will make it through all those things by God's grace because he promises his compassion and his presence.

Does this mean that no Christian woman will die in childbirth? Well, we know that is not true. My own grandmother died in childbirth. The reality is, if a woman knows Jesus Christ, she will be saved through childbirth; that will be her entryway into the presence of God. It is a promise that women can hold on to as they live their lives under the headship of God, and in the home. A life of faithfulness and all of those virtues that verse 15 mentions are the normal life. So the verse is hope, not pain, not curse, not that God is going to damn you, but that God is going to save you. The message is that He's come for that very purpose, and our faith is our link to Him. In the fruit of that faith, which is love, holiness, and self-control, there will be blessings.

I am passionately convinced that God's Word is true and eternal, not a wax nose that we can move about at the dictates of whatever we call civil rights. These old, archaic views are God's words, and it is a great danger to declare independence from God. Our world has done that, and look at our wars which no side can win; look at our climate catastrophes; our political gridlock; our hopelessness that runs from continent to continent. We are independent from God! Long ago, Judah declared their independence from their God, Yahweh, the Lord of the covenant, and God responded to them:

Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the LORD your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go. Oh that you had paid attention to my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea..."

Isaiah 48.17,18

Heavenly Father, I pray that we, as the people of God, will know your peace. I pray that we will embrace your righteousness, that we will be clothed in it even as Jesus Christ extends it to us from the cross. I ask that we would stand fast on the foundation of Your Word, though highly unpopular, greatly misunderstood: may we be a people who pilgrim through this world even embracing the misunderstanding, so that your name and your glory will be held high. Help us to be careful teachers of the Word. Help us to explain. Deliver us from chauvinism and feminism, that we will simply, as servants of the living God, live our lives humbly and lovingly for the advancement of your Kingdom. In Your Name, Amen.