



Reflections on Preaching

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In the past few years, *Preaching Today* has been kind enough to transcribe some of my sermons and send those transcripts, along with the audio recordings, to their subscribers. The first one they sent out was part of the Ecclesiastes series I preached a few years back. The most recent issue includes a sermon I did on the atonement along with a message by [Bill Hybels](#).

I am grateful for their support and when I received *Preaching Today* this month it reminded me of an interview I did for them last year on the subject of preaching. They were unable to print all of it because it was too long and so I have chosen to put it all up here in case anyone is interested.

By way of preface, I will simply say to all the young preachers that preaching is like driving a clutch; it takes a long time to do well if you live through the practice. In high school I was the student body president who did a lot of public speaking to large groups. In college I got my B.A. in Speech, and following college I spent some years as a co-host for a national radio show while also teaching a college group twice weekly in a multi-ethnic church. So, I began Mars Hill Church ten years ago at the age of twenty-five thinking I could step in and preach just fine, only to discover that it was the hardest thing I had ever done. The difficulty of coming up with fresh insights combined with the difficulty of finding my own voice and speaking with clarity, candor, and confidence, not to mention some comedy, took hundreds of sermons to even begin to overcome regularly. In saying that, I am not saying I am the world's greatest preacher. In fact, if you don't like me now just imagine how bad I was if this is the improved version after preaching literally thousands of hours in the past decade. Nevertheless, here are the original answers I set to *Preaching Today* with some minor edits and additions.

WHETHER IS WAS THE SERMON WE USED IN THIS ISSUE OR NOT, COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR PREPARATION PROCESS?

1. I prayerfully choose a book of the Bible (and sometimes a thematic theological series) that bites me and plan on spending months, sometimes years, studying that book in preparation to preach it. A book like Genesis will take me over 1,000 hours of work to study, write commentary, and preach.
2. I continually pray for the Holy Spirit to teach me His Word as I am studying the Scripture. No amount of theological training can overcome the deficit of a preacher who is not led by the Holy Spirit to understand and proclaim the very words that He inspired.
3. As I study, I wrestle with tough texts as Jacob wrestled Jesus. I find that preaching tough texts such as gender roles, the flood, hell, etc., are much like driving a car into a steep curve. If you hit the brakes in fear you will lose control, but if you accelerate into the tough turns, gravity actually slingshots you through smoothly. In the pulpit,

momentum and authority come through accelerating into tough texts in the study and then driving the church through them.

4. As I study Scripture I steep in the verses/phrases/words/pictures that bite like tea flavoring in hot water. Too often the principles of Scripture are preached when the images and word pictures are far more impacting and memorable. For this reason other movements have even adopted the biblical images so that a dove now represents peace, not the Holy Spirit, and a rainbow represents gay rights, not the Flood, by which God killed people for sin (including sexual sin). I find that sermons are memorable if the images in the Scriptures can be drilled into the imaginations of people. Perhaps the master at this was Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who would not just describe a scene of Scripture, but actually put you in it through your imagination.
5. Only after I have spent considerable time in the naked text do I check my studies with trusted teachers to ensure that I have not come to heretical conclusions. I try not to pick up the commentaries until I have had many months in the Scripture I am preaching to ensure that I do not get lazy or simply rely on another man's walk with God. I will read it repeatedly in multiple translations, and read every decent commentary from every theological persuasion I can find to examine the book from every angle.
6. I live what I learn, teach it to my family, and spend a lot of time repenting of sin and seeking to obey God's Word by the grace He provides. Much of my sermon is simply explaining what the Scripture says, how that has changed my life, and how that is transforming my family and those people with whom I live in community. In this way I hope to demonstrate to my church what it means to come under Scripture; by talking about my own sins and flaws, they see me struggling through Scripture and not just preaching my tidy answers at the end of my studies. Because of this my sermons are long, anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half.

WHAT ARE YOUR PERSONAL STUDY HABITS? WHAT METHODS OR RESEARCH DO YOU USE? WHICH TOOLS DO YOU FIND MOST HELPFUL?

I find myself continually coming back to five questions that shape every one my sermons:

1. What does Scripture say?

To answer this we need to check translations, do our word studies, and find out exactly what words best convey the meaning of Scripture.

2. What does Scripture mean?

Here we need to interpret what is said, which requires commentaries, cultural background studies, etc. At this phase [*John Glynn's Commentary and Reference Survey*](#) is a must-have for every preacher and teacher as he rates all of the best commentaries and other reference material on various books of the Bible and theological topics.

3. Why do we resist this truth?

Here we are assuming that people will not simply embrace God's truth but fight it with their thoughts and/or actions because they are sinners who, like Romans 1:18 says, suppress the truth. So, we attempt to predict their objections and resistance so that we can answer them and remove their resistance to get them to embrace God's truth for their life. This part of the sermon must be confrontational and often ends up

in people walking out, standing up to argue, and sending nasty emails, all of which indicates you've hit a nerve like God wants you to. The real fight begins at this point and a preacher needs to come with his hands up looking for an opening much like a boxer.

4. Why does this matter?

We need to connect all that we have said to a missional purpose for our lives, families, church, and ultimately God's glory. Something may be true but if people do not find it to also be important they tend not to act on it. On this point I like to connect Scripture a lot to the character of God, nature of the gospel, our mission in our city, and the quality of our lives both individually and collectively as a city of God within our city.

5. How is Jesus the hero?

The Bible is one story in which Jesus is the hero. Therefore, to properly teach/preach the Bible we have to continually lift Him up as the hero and any sermon in which the focus is not on the person and work of Jesus will lack spiritual authority and power because the Holy Spirit will not bless the teaching of any hero other than Jesus.

WHAT ADVICE CAN YOU OFFER TO OTHER PREACHERS?

Read the biographies of great preachers. There are some good books on preaching such as [*Bryan Chapell's Christ-Centered Preaching*](#), but in my mind the best tutor is the biographies of great preachers. In reading these we can learn about their family life, devotional life, study habits, etc. One book that is a good introduction to the Puritans who elevated the pulpit to a thunderous art is [*Light and Heat: A Puritan View of the Pulpit*](#), written by Bruce Bickel. I also am a rabid fan of the reformed Baptist Charles Haddon Spurgeon and read any biography I can find on his life and ministry.

Beware of the radio preachers. As a new Christian I listened to many hours of Chuck Swindoll, Greg Laurie, Tony Evans, Billy Graham, John MacArthur and others and was truly blessed. However, when men preach for the radio they are preaching to the masses. Subsequently, they are not as likely to speak personally of themselves, their struggles, their families, or the specific issues in their church because they are preaching to America. Most pastors don't preach to the nation or world, but just to their flock who need to know their pastor, see what the Holy Spirit has been doing with the Bible in their life, and how the Bible is integrated into their daily life and relationships instead of vague and general illustrations and principles that are true but not specific to their community. Also, younger preachers can often listen to so many hours of a radio preacher that they end up parroting him rather than finding their own voice and style. For example, if I had a buck for every twenty-year-old Calvinist who sounds like he's channeling John Piper or every Calvary guy who sounds like Chuck Smith I could have a building as large as Joel Osteen's. The key is not to mimic a man, but to learn from him and honor him simply by preaching the same gospel.

Study the stand-up comedians. Stand-up comedy and preaching are the only two mediums I can think of in which someone walks onto a stage to talk for a long time to a large crowd. Dave Chapelle, Carlos Mencia, and Chris Rock are genius at capturing an audience using irony and sarcasm.

Junk your notes and go with the Ghost . . . sometimes. Some years ago I gave up trying to manuscript or outline my sermons. Now, I focus on knowing the Scriptures I am preaching, spending many hours in prayer, meditation, and repentance through the Scriptures, and being filled with the power of God the Ghost. Then, I just get up and with a

few scribbled notes in my margins I preach as God leads and trust that God will direct my words and He always does. Sometimes I may use a brief outline, but I am not tied to any one way of being ready to preach and just do whatever seems like it will do the job best.

Plug everything into your pulpit. We have our children's ministry and small group ministry follow the teaching from the pulpit so that the whole church is studying and learning together to ensure focus and unity.

Preach Jesus. Jesus' name should be spoken repeatedly throughout a sermon so that it is clear which God you are speaking of. Jesus should be the hero of every sermon, the answer to every question, and the hope for every person. Jesus promised that if He is lifted up He will draw people and the key to church growth is the exaltation of Jesus.

Preach Jesus some more

Give your sermons away. Some years ago we started putting the sermons online as free MP3 downloads. Today, with podcasting and vodcasting, we are seeing millions of people download the sermons. Our podcast has been as high as #1 on iTunes for religion and spirituality. The web is the new front door and many people will visit your church through your website long before they attend a church event. Also, many people like to catch up on past teachings, forward pertinent sermons to their friends, and listen to teachings while they drive to work, cook their meals, and weed their garden. By giving sermons away for free, a preacher's ministry can continue for years into the future to a much broader audience than they have on a Sunday.

After you've preached, let it go and sleep like a Calvinist. Don't listen to your sermons over and over beating yourself up. Once you've preached a sermon, let it be a finished work and move on. Passion, courage, and boldness are keys to preaching that simply cannot exist in someone who is too analytical or critical of themselves, so lighten up, have fun, and let it fly in Jesus' name.

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