



PREACHING
BY THE BOOK

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PREACHING BY THE BOOK

*Developing and Delivering
Text-Driven Sermons*

R. SCOTT PACE

HEATH A. THOMAS, *Editor*



NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Preaching by the Book

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*To the Faithful—Who bow humbly before the Lord,
Who stand firmly on his Word, and
Who preach boldly for his glory*



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Acknowledgments

The first time I heard preaching that captivated my soul, I was a sophomore in college. I had grown up in the church and sat through countless sermons, but I had never heard the Scriptures come alive. I'm sure my teenage heart was spiritually insensitive, but the method of preaching I was exposed to in my earlier years, while biblically sound, was not the textual exposition I was introduced to by Dr. Bill Bennett.

The spiritual power, divine authority, Scriptural clarity, and timeless relevance he exhibited each week left my thirsty soul salivating for more of Jesus and his Word! I've never gotten over my hunger for such preaching. The Lord used textual exposition to draw me closer to him—to grip my heart with a passion for Scripture. God used such preaching to call me into ministry. And this preaching had such a profound impact on me that I've devoted my life to practicing it and teaching others to do the same.

I'm indebted to many others whose preaching I've admired, whether by reading their sermons (Alexander Maclaren, Charles Spurgeon, Warren Weirsbe), listening to their messages (Adrian Rogers, John MacArthur, Johnny Hunt,), or studying under their tutelage (Stephen Rummage, Allan Moseley, Danny Akin). These godly men and gifted preachers have made a lasting impression on my life and ministry for which I am eternally grateful.

Of course, my understanding of preaching would be entirely theoretical without the churches, ministries, and people of God who have encouraged, responded to, and even tolerated, my sermons. I'm also grateful for my students who, while being teachable, have sharpened my skills and challenged my own understanding of the sacred task. Their encouragement to document our classroom lectures and discussions were instrumental in this book's coming to fruition.

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To my wife, Dana, your support and appreciation for my preaching have far exceeded the mandatory compliments of a spouse. Thank you for leading our four children in worship on the countless Sundays you have parented in the pew while I fulfilled my calling in the pulpit. Your willing sacrifice has yielded spiritual fruit in the countless lives of others.

Ultimately, all glory, honor, and praise go to Jesus Christ, who graciously called an unworthy young man to preach the unsearchable riches of his grace and gospel. May you use this to further your fame, equip others to preach your name, and draw the lost to trust in you.

About the Library

The Hobbs College Library equips Christians with tools for growing in the faith and for effective ministry. The library trains its readers in three major areas: Bible, theology, and ministry. The series originates from the Herschel H. Hobbs College of Theology and Ministry at Oklahoma Baptist University, where biblical, orthodox, and practical education lies at its core. Training the next generation was important for the great Baptist statesman Dr. Herschel H. Hobbs, and the Hobbs College that bears his name fosters that same vision.

The Hobbs College Library: Biblical. Orthodox. Practical.

PART I

THE FOUNDATION

CHAPTER 1

Inspiration

Speaking the Truth

We all have favorite preachers whom we admire. Whether because of their dynamic delivery, spiritual passion, or clear explanation of the biblical text, certain preachers inspire us. But we may not be able to pinpoint a specific attribute that resonates most with us because good preaching involves a combination of essential factors, both human and divine.

Phillips Brooks captured this blend in his famous description of preaching as “truth through personality.”¹ This succinct definition of the sacred task characterizes a sermon as the communication of divine and eternal “truth.” But it also conveys the significance of the messenger’s part in God’s plan as he graciously communicates

¹ Phillips Brooks, *The Joy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1989), 26.

eternal truth through the unique gifts, individual character, and speaking style of willing servants “through personality.”²

Although there are more precise and prescriptive definitions of Christian preaching,³ this basic explanation provides a foundational perspective that reverently considers God’s role and our responsibility. We cannot escape the gravity of the immense obligation we bear as God’s chosen instruments to preach his word (1 Cor 9:16). God has mysteriously and marvelously selected us to participate in his divine work. And yet the success of the sermon, its eternal and life-changing impact, does not ultimately depend on us. Instead, it lies in the assurance of God’s unfailing Word to accomplish his divine will (Isa 55:10–11). This underscores the reality that preaching is fundamentally a theological endeavor. Therefore, we must begin our exploration of the preaching task by laying the doctrinal foundation for sermon preparation and delivery.⁴

² Others have expanded on Brooks’s definition while including the same foundational elements. For example, Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix define *preaching* as “the oral communication of biblical truth by the Holy Spirit through a human personality to a given audience with the intent of enabling a positive response.” Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 27.

³ Haddon Robinson provides one of the most widely recognized, expanded definitions of *biblical preaching*: “the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.” Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 21.

⁴ For a more extensive look at the theology of preaching and its implications you may also consider the homiletical chapter, “The Pastor and God’s Communication,” by Daniel L. Akin and R. Scott Pace, in *Pastoral Theology: Theological Foundations for Who a Pastor Is and What He Does* (Nashville: B&H, 2017).

A Theology of Preaching

The theological nature of preaching begins with our convictions about God and his divine self-disclosure. Scripture declares that there is one true and living God (Deut 6:4; Isa 46:9) who exists in three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19; 2 Cor 13:14). The Bible also teaches that God has revealed himself to us, generally through his creation (Rom 1:20; Ps 19:1–6) and, more specifically, through his word (2 Tim 3:16) and his Son (Heb 1:1–2). God’s disclosure of his personal nature expresses his desire to be known and compels us to proclaim his eternal truth. In other words, “We speak because God has spoken.”⁵ Or, as pastor-theologian John Stott asserts, “It is God’s speech that makes our speech necessary.”⁶

By disclosing himself to us, God has not only declared his existence; he has also extended his grace and redemption through Jesus Christ. The reality of God’s holiness, man’s sinfulness, and Christ’s forgiveness is the essence of the gospel and the heart of the message God desires to be proclaimed to the ends of the earth (Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8). Personal faith in Jesus Christ is the only means of salvation (John 14:6; Acts 4:12) and God has designated preaching as the means by which he will accomplish his redemptive plan (Rom 10:14; 1 Cor 1:21).

Therefore, God’s revelation and redemption become the theological impetus for Christian preaching. Stott elaborates further and helps us see that our approach to preaching also hinges on our core convictions regarding several other related and fundamental doctrines.

⁵ Al Mohler, *He Is Not Silent* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 42.

⁶ John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 15.

- ***A Conviction about God***—The kind of God we believe in determines what kind of sermons we preach.
- ***A Conviction about Scripture***—We cannot handle Scripture adequately in the pulpit if our doctrine of Scripture is inadequate.
- ***A Conviction about the Church***—The Word of God is the scepter by which Christ rules the church and the food with which he nourishes it.
- ***A Conviction about the Pastorate***—The Chief Shepherd has delegated the pastoral care of feeding his own sheep which he has purchased with his blood.
- ***A Conviction about Preaching***—Whenever pastors expound God’s Word with integrity, people in the church hear the voice of God.⁷

These doctrinal convictions unite to help formulate our theology of preaching. They also establish the spiritual mind-set necessary for us to develop into more faithful preachers. As Mohler summarizes, “A theology of preaching begins with the humble acknowledgment that preaching is not a human invention but a gracious creation of God and a central part of His revealed will of the church.”⁸

Because God has ordained preaching as a designated means for accomplishing his work, we can benefit from tracing the theological root of preaching to the spiritual fruit it produces. God himself, in the person of the Holy Spirit, is the divine agent that unifies all of the elements of preaching, from preparation to proclamation. Our understanding of the Spirit’s work in preaching is also a crucial theological component for us to consider.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 92–134.

⁸ Mohler, *He Is Not Silent*, 39.

We must first recognize that the Spirit is *the divine agent of inspiration*. Scripture was conceived by the work of the Spirit through the biblical writers. By the Holy Spirit human authors recorded God's message in a supernatural way that incorporated their knowledge, skills, personality, and experience while preserving the divine nature of his written Word (2 Pet 1:19–21). Through his work of inspiration, the Scriptures reveal God (2 Tim 3:16) and are a living and powerful, two-edged sword that cuts with the precision of a surgical scalpel (Heb 4:12).

The same Holy Spirit who inspired Scripture also works in us as *the divine agent of interpretation*. Jesus identified him as the “Spirit of truth” who guides us into the truth and discloses God's Word to us (John 16:13–15). He teaches us all things (John 14:26) and enables us to understand spiritual and scriptural truth (1 Cor 2:10–16). As the One who inspired the Scriptures, the Spirit is able to help us interpret them faithfully and accurately.

In addition to aiding our study of his divinely inspired Word, the Spirit also serves as *the divine agent of infilling*. While the Holy Spirit indwells the life of every believer (1 Cor 6:19; Eph 1:13; 1 John 4:13), we are also called continually to “be filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5:18). Particularly for the preacher, this infilling provides the divine empowerment to proclaim boldly and clearly the truth of God's Word (Acts 4:31). Jesus characterized his own preaching as that which was anointed by the Spirit (Luke 4:18; cf. Isa 61:1) and also described this work of the Spirit when he commissioned his apostles (Matt 10:20). Likewise, our preaching must be enabled and empowered by the infilling of the Holy Spirit as we yield to him (1 Cor 2:4).

The Spirit not only works in the preacher's preparation and delivery, but he also actively works in the lives of the listeners. The Spirit opens the hearts of the hearers as *the divine agent of*

illumination. As we preach his Word, the Lord pierces and awakens hearts (Acts 16:14). The Spirit convicts sinners (John 16:8), offers assurance to God's children (Rom 8:16; 1 John 3:24), and enables believers to receive God's truth with spiritual understanding (1 Cor 2:12–13; 1 Thes 2:13).

But the Spirit is also *the divine agent of implementation*. Through the work of the Spirit, believers are empowered to apply the truth of God's Word to their lives. Life-change does not simply occur in our own strength and by our best efforts but by the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18; Zech 4:6). Through the Spirit we are able to put to death the deeds of the flesh (Rom 8:13), and by the Spirit we live and are led (Gal 5:18, 25). The Spirit also enables us to worship (Phil 3:3; John 4:24), endows us with spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:11), and produces spiritual fruit in our lives (Gal 5:22–23).

So the Spirit of God who inspired the Scriptures enables us to interpret them, fills us to proclaim them, opens the hearts of the listeners to receive them, and supernaturally applies them to their lives. Therefore, the comprehensive work of the Spirit, in conjunction with the revelation of the Father and redemption through his Son, firmly establishes a trinitarian theology of preaching that serves as the basis for our practical approach to the sacred task.

Textual Preaching

Our methodology for preaching must flow from our theology of preaching. At the core of our doctrinal beliefs and central to our philosophy of preaching is our view of Scripture. The Bible is God revealing himself to us through personal and propositional truth. While we may readily affirm this reality, we must also consider the reasons for our affirmation.

The supernatural process by which God provided the Scriptures gives us confidence in their accuracy and reliability. First, *the Lord*

revealed his wisdom. God has made himself known through his creation and his conduct. Scripture is a manifestation and a by-product of his divine self-disclosure. Second, *the Spirit guided his writers.* The Holy Spirit superintended the writing process and guided more than 40 human authors over a period of more than 1600 years to compose his written revelation to man. Third, *the authors recorded his Word.* God selected men of faith and used their personalities, writing styles, and perspectives to accurately record his Holy Word according to his purpose and design. And, finally, *the church preserved his witness.* God's people have preserved the timeless truth of his sacred testimony by faithfully proclaiming and practicing the teachings of Scripture.

Through this providential process God has provided the Scriptures in order to disclose himself to us in several ways. For example, *Scripture records the works of God.* The great and mighty deeds of God have been recorded for our instruction so that through the Scriptures we might find encouragement and hope (Rom 15:4). Additionally, *Scripture recounts the ways of God.* The Bible teaches us that God's ways and thoughts are beyond our comprehension. But through his Word his ways are made known and his plan is accomplished (Isa 55:9–11). *Scripture also reflects the will of God.* The Bible expresses God's desires and equips us to discern his will (Rom 12:2). Most importantly, *Scripture reveals the "who" of God.* The personal character and attributes of God are clearly revealed through his Word (Ps 19:7–9). Our view of Scripture is rooted in the conviction that God has revealed himself to us through these facets of his Word.

As a result of the supernatural process and the nature of biblical revelation, we can affirm that the Scriptures are the inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God. Therefore, the Bible is both sure and sufficient. This doctrinal conviction has significant implications

for our preaching philosophy. The divine and authoritative nature of Scripture influences how we select a passage, how we study the text, how we structure our sermon, and how we share the message.

Selecting a Passage. Text selection is the first step of sermon preparation. Many pastors exhaust themselves trying to discern the biblical passage God wants them to preach each Sunday. This is typically considered a “topical approach” where a particular topic determines the preaching text. While in some special occasions, unique circumstances that require our attention, or a personal conviction that leads us to a specific passage, our primary approach should be a “textual approach” that allows the text to determine the topic.⁹

A preaching passage consists of a complete subject, thought, or concept expressed by the biblical author with consideration of the immediate context. Expository series walk through books of the Bible or extended passages in order to teach faithfully the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). This approach honors the entire biblical text as God’s Word, protects us from “cherry picking” easy or familiar passages, teaches biblical truth within its context, keeps our messages fresh, helps our people prepare for our sermons, and models for them how to study God’s Word.

Studying the Text. Our interpretation of a passage in sermon preparation also flows from our convictions regarding Scripture. We must come before God’s word humbly, seeking wisdom to understand his divine truth and acknowledging our inability apart from his help. Our investigation and interpretation must be faithful to the text

⁹ When occasions arise where a specific topic needs to be addressed, the preacher should choose a specific passage that addresses the issue and expound it rather than taking a “patchwork” approach that pulls together isolated verses and strips them from their context. This safeguards the interpretational process and honors the sacred text of Scripture.

and preserve its intended meaning. As teachers of God's Word, we are held to a higher level of accountability because of the significant influence we have on others (Jas 3:1). His elevated expectations for us are measured by one standard, our fidelity to the Scriptures. Our handling of the biblical text is how God ultimately evaluates our preaching ministry (2 Tim 2:15). Therefore, we must devote ourselves to diligent study that reveres the Bible as God's Word, preserves the authorial intent of the passage, and delivers the timeless truth with relevant application.

Structuring the Sermon. Our sermons typically follow a familiar outline rather than the textual pattern. We have preaching habits, a preferred style, and a common format that we often gravitate toward as we craft our sermons. But the Bible communicates its message in a variety of forms. The form of the passage should serve as the blueprint for our sermon construction. In other words, the structure of the sermon should mirror the literary structure of the passage. This allows the meaning of the text to be communicated according to how God originally designed it. When we present the primary truth of a passage in a way that corresponds with the pattern of that passage, we honor the sacred text of Scripture.

Sharing the Message. How we communicate the life-changing truth of Scripture is significant. Our confidence in the supernatural power of God's Word should inspire us to proclaim it with courage and conviction. Yet we should not mistake this assurance for arrogance. We cannot rely on our gifts or abilities. Rather, through Christ, we are made confident and competent to preach God's Word (2 Cor 4:4–6). As a result, we can preach the Scriptures boldly without hesitation or reservation (Eph 6:20; Acts 4:29). Our preaching style can be some of the most compelling evidence of our deeply held convictions regarding Scripture and can be used by God to strengthen the faith of our hearers.

Ultimately our convictions and our confidence in God's Word, its reliability and relevance, dictate our preaching philosophy. Scripture as divine revelation, inspired by God and preserved through the centuries as his inerrant and infallible Word, demands and deserves our unrelenting devotion as preachers. Therefore, Scripture must be the source *and* substance for our sermons!

The Task of Preaching

Our theology of preaching and convictions regarding Scripture compel us to kneel humbly before God while we stand confidently on his Word. *His* revelation and redemption, accomplished by *his* Spirit, through *his* word, clearly define preaching as a work of God. But the nature of this confession requires us to consider carefully our role as preachers.

Ultimately our preaching responsibility derives from God's nature as a communicator. We see that dialogue emanates from the essence of our triune God. Within the Godhead humanity's creation was proposed and determined (Gen 1:26). God's voice was also unified in its harmonious commissioning of Isaiah (Isa 6:8). This dialogue between the members of the Godhead can also be observed in the Father's vocal affirmation of Jesus at his baptism and transfiguration (Matt 3:17; 17:5). Jesus spoke of receiving his message and ministry from the Father (John 15:15), and the Spirit discloses what he hears from the Father and the Son (John 16:13).

As God reveals himself through what he declares, we recognize the power of his Word and its central role in redemptive history. Through *his spoken Word* the universe and all of creation came into existence (Gen 1:9; cf. 1:3, 6, 14). By *his written Word* God revealed himself through the prophets (Heb 1:1; 2 Pet 1:20–21). In *his living Word* God manifested himself in the person and work of Jesus Christ (John 1:1, 14; Heb 1:2). But also, through *his proclaimed Word* God

has chosen to use designated spokesmen to preach his Word and magnify his glory (1 Cor 1:17, 26–29; 2 Cor 5:20). God has always worked through the power of his Word!

His Spokesmen. God’s strategic choice to use the proclamation of His Word derives from his nature and also defines our essence as preachers. We are God’s spokesmen. Throughout history God has graciously chosen to use specific individuals to declare his Word. For example, Enoch proclaimed God’s righteousness and judgment in his generation (Gen 5:22–24; Jude 14–15). Likewise, Noah was a “herald of righteousness” and messenger of hope (Gen 6:5–9; 2 Pet 2:5). Abraham was designated as God’s prophet (Gen 20:7), and Moses was commissioned to be God’s messenger of deliverance (Exod 3:1–22). Like Moses, God’s prophets proclaimed his message through the preaching of his Word (Heb 1:1; cf. Jer 1:9; Isa 51:16).

In the 400-year absence of the prophetic voices, God’s people desperately longed for a word from the Lord (Amos 8:11–12). The preaching ministry of John the Baptist renewed God’s redemptive message (Luke 3:2–3) and paved the way for Jesus’s preaching ministry (Mark 1:14; Matt 4:17). After his death, burial, and resurrection, Jesus commissioned his disciples to “proclaim the gospel” throughout the world (Mark 16:15).

The early church was birthed in obedience to Christ’s command. Peter’s Pentecost sermon was used by God to convert 3,000 souls (Acts 2:41). The church multiplied as believers “went about preaching the word” (Acts 8:4), and its expansion continued through the ministry of the Word (Acts 19:20; 28:31). God’s design for church growth continues to hinge on the faithful preaching of his servants as he instructs us to “preach the word” (2 Tim 4:2). Ultimately, his kingdom will be ushered in through the proclamation of the gospel to all nations (Matt 24:14).

God has clearly ordained preaching to be an instrumental part of his redemptive plan. Therefore, as preachers we must recognize our role as his ambassadors, “God making his appeal through us” (2 Cor 5:20). This does not mean we are passive participants but active agents who must work tirelessly to prepare and proclaim his Word faithfully. We must honor God’s calling on us to “hold firm to the trustworthy word” and “to give instruction in sound doctrine” (Titus 1:9) by devoting ourselves to diligent study and passionate delivery. This means we must not only develop sermons and sharpen our gifts; we must also give careful attention to our character. None of us will qualify on our own merit or talent, yet by his grace God can use us, with all of our inadequacies, for the glory of the cross (1 Cor 1:26–29).

Our Style. Our preaching style is often relegated to our demeanor in the pulpit or our preaching personality. While sermon delivery is certainly related to our individual personalities and manner of communication, we should also consider rhetorical skills in light of our theological convictions. For example, our preaching should be characterized by a conversational style that is clear and personal. This acknowledges the spiritual reality of the ongoing dialogue between God and his people as his Spirit speaks to hearts through the Scriptures. Similarly, our tone should reflect the tone of the text, and our demeanor should correspond with the emotion invoked by the passage. For example, encouraging texts should be preached with joy, convicting passages should be declared with intensity, and lament passages should be communicated with empathy and hope.

Preachers should maintain good eye contact not simply as a matter of courtesy but in an effort to reflect the personal communication God desires to have with each person. We must also be aware of the impact our nonverbal gestures have in our preaching. Our

facial expressions, hand motions, and platform movement work in conjunction with our speech either to corroborate or to contradict the message. They also allow us to accentuate (not exaggerate!) various truths or points of emphasis within our sermon.¹⁰ All of these important factors combine to support adopting an extemporaneous style that is thoroughly prepared, that uses the preaching text as the primary sermon notes, and that is sensitive and submissive to the Spirit.

Our grooming and dress are also significant factors that cannot be dismissed as superficial. While God does not dictate our decorum, as his representatives we must present ourselves with dignity and civility. This does not mean we are obligated to wear tailored suits or designer clothes. But we must also avoid the opposite extreme of informality that conveys a careless and cavalier attitude. A good rule of thumb is to dress with one more degree of formality than your listeners. This rule of thumb avoids overdressing on the one hand and creating an unnecessary barrier or underdressing on the other and thereby not being taken seriously.

Attire can actually help position us to gain a hearing with our audience by both demonstrating and inviting respect. Appropriate dress demonstrates respect by displaying a proper appreciation and personal regard for the occasion, the people, and our preaching responsibility. It also invites respect by indicating our preparation, organization, and personal care for our appearance. Although we may need to adjust our apparel according to more casual trends, we must also maintain a mature and modest decorum that honors the Lord and our calling as his spokesmen.

¹⁰ For a more thorough handling of the issues related to preaching style and delivery, you may consider: Wayne McDill, *The Moment of Truth* (Nashville: B&H, 1999).

Conclusion

Because we believe God has revealed himself through the Scriptures, redeemed humanity through his Son, and ordained preaching as his strategy, we are called and compelled to preach! In addition, our certainty regarding the power of the Scriptures and the work of his Spirit give us confidence that his Word will accomplish his work.

These convictions drive our approach to preaching. As preachers of his Word, we are God's spokesmen, "servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" who must be "found faithful" (1 Cor 4:1–2). This requires our sermons to be rooted and grounded in the biblical text. As we proclaim his Word, our goal must be to preach "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that [people's] faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Cor 2:4–5).

In addition to our goal as his spokesmen, we must also consider our role as his messengers. God has prepared each of us, with our unique personality and gifts, to deliver his message for his purposes to a particular audience on a given occasion. This requires us to consider our style as well as our substance. We must preach with clarity, courage, and conviction. We must be passionate, not passive; fervent, not fake; bold but not brash. We are preachers, not performers.

Therefore, as we humbly embrace this biblical and theological understanding of the preaching task, we must consider how to become more effective and faithful communicators of God's Word. The process and principles outlined in this book are sermon development tools designed to that end in order to help us all fulfill our ministry (2 Tim 4:5).