



NEWCHURCHES

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PREACH WITH MORE THAN JUST FEELING

By: Ed Stetzer

Preaching. Countless people have done it and are doing it. And as we all know, there isn't just one way of doing it. When it comes to the work of proclamation, we have various strategies and styles—some healthier than others.

Three Common Approaches to Preaching

What I find most often among preachers is something close to one of the three following approaches. While each approach has value, they are not enough in and of themselves.

1. The inspired approach. We probably know this better as the "I had a word from the Lord" approach. In its best form, this approach reflects a preacher who has been impressed by the Holy Spirit concerning a particular truth in Scripture. It is, in a sense, first person: "The Lord led me, and I want to tell you how He is leading." In some ways, it reminds us of 1 Peter 4:11: "If anyone speaks, it should be as one who speaks God's words."

The danger here is that if we aren't binding ourselves to the Word of God, it isn't difficult to get off the path of truth and allow our hearts—which the Bible calls deceitful—to guide our preaching more than we allow Scripture to guide us.

2. The proverbial approach. The book of Proverbs is a remarkable compilation of wisdom sayings inspired by the Holy Spirit for our instruction. Since Scripture teaches in that manner, it makes sense that we are also teach by providing common-sense life principles people deeply need to hear. Messages with a proverbial approach include

phrases like, "It makes good sense to do this." The danger here is that if we don't tie the message to the person of God, we only offer powerless slogans and pithy sayings. In and of themselves, they aren't bad. But if our message is only pithy proverbs, detached from the biblical text, it removes the Holy Spirit's primary instrument for changing people's lives.

3. The moralistic approach. The Bible tells us to do and not do certain things. Scripture gives us commandments that must be preached. From the Ten Commandments to the Sermon on the Mount and to all the imperatives in our New Testament epistles, God's call is to "do."

The book of James is almost entirely centered on principles of basic Christian living. This is good. Faithful preachers will call people to respond and to act. Yet the danger in the moralistic approach comes when we don't tie the message to the gospel. At that point, we are only imparting empty moralism devoid of the transforming power of a crucified and risen Savior.

All of these types of preaching are partly right, but left alone they can be problematic. Instead, we need a textual and Christ-centered approach to preaching because none of us is godly enough to hear perfectly from the Lord.

Our wisdom will never be greater than the Bible's, and our people need more than a list of rules they cannot perfectly follow. With a textual approach that anchors the sermon to the Scriptures and points people to Jesus as the fulfillment of God's law and promises, we can strike the right balance.

The Text-Centered Approach

The text-centered approach moves you—the preacher—away from you. Yes, that's what I said—away from you because you can only impart so much inspiration, so much proverbial wisdom and so much moralism. In the end, everything you have is never enough to accomplish what God sends preachers to do—bring the dead to life and empower the living to walk in a manner worthy of their calling. As faithful preachers proclaim the truth, God accomplishes this through the ministry of the Word by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Text-centered preaching allows the Scripture to shape the agenda. This doesn't mean all preaching will sound alike, nor does it mean there's only one way to preach. Text-centered preaching can be done by working through books of the Bible, but also by searching the text and bringing a faithful representation of the full teaching of Scripture on a topic or a theme.

Obviously, other approaches exist, but there are also cautions here as well. Some might say God turns His Word (logos) into a special application for us (rhema). The problem with this is, well, it turns the

Bible into a "Magic 8" ball, serving up truths that God actually did not put in His Word—at least not in that verse.

Taking verses out of their context—what they were intended to mean—and making them something special to us beyond their intended meaning actually teaches people to devalue God's Word. When we make Scripture mean anything, then it really means nothing. A better plan is to teach what God intended. I don't ever want to preach a message where I quote a passage that, upon getting to heaven, Paul or David say to me, "Come on, that was obviously not what I meant when I wrote that."

Every book of the Bible, every passage of Scripture, every verse and word all mean something. The question that preaching must explain is, "What was the author's point? How would his original audience understand him?" Then the preacher helps explain: "What does this mean for us today?" This isn't a new interpretation of the text, but a fresh application of the original meaning.

In many ways, this is more difficult to do than the inspired approach ("God told me"), the proverbial approach ("it's good common sense") and the moral approach ("you must be good") because it requires us to be immersed in the text, seeking guidance and understanding by the Spirit. While it's harder to do, the text-centered approach still involves aspects of each.

You see, it's not that inspiration, proverbs and practical how-to-isms don't matter and can't be used in a biblically responsible matter. It's that teaching the Bible matters more because that is what God uses to reveal Himself, draw people to His Son and change hearts. Thus, we let the text shape the message and we must preach it "as one who speaks God's words" (1 Pet. 4:11, HCSB), teaching the wisdom of the Scriptures and teaching morality lived out in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The text—the Scripture—is the only certain word God has given the church. God has shared with us His whole Word for the purpose of knowing Him and making Him known. If we aren't preaching His Word, we're merely offering "persuasive words of wisdom." Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:4-5, "My speech and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a powerful demonstration by the Spirit, so that your faith might not be based on men's wisdom but on God's power." All of us want our preaching to have power—real power—but that only comes through the Word of God.

Only the Bible promises that it is appropriate for what the sermon entails. As 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

I find many Christians are ready to affirm the inerrancy of Scripture (that God's Word is perfect and true), but are less familiar with the sufficiency of Scripture. To say the Bible is sufficient means that it's enough; it provides us with what we need and, as such, we preach in light of that truth. God has given us 66 books written by those inspired by the Holy Spirit. And today that same Holy Spirit leads us to understand and preach those very words.

It's an unfortunate reality that many Christians believe in the Father, Son and Holy Bible—omitting and missing the power and guidance of the Spirit. Conversely, too many others believe they don't need the Bible to preach effectively. The Spirit does guide a preacher, but only to the truth found in His Word for the good of the people and the glory of Jesus.

Preaching a Christian Message

I made a commitment long ago never to preach a message that would still be true if Jesus has not died and been raised. If Oprah can give the same message (how to have a better marriage, live with less stress, etc.), then I know I am not preaching a distinctively Christian message.

It is precisely because Jesus has fulfilled all righteousness, died for sinners, conquered death and reigns forever that we can preach all of Scripture with boldness and an eager expectation that God will work through our words. When we leave Christ out of the sermon, we leave people without hope. When we preach without telling them to rely on the Spirit's power, we leave them deficient, which ultimately leads to spiritual despair.

Christianity isn't about how to have a better life but about receiving and living a new life hidden in Christ (Gal. 2:20). This is why I teach in light of the cross and the resurrection. This means when I preach from Proverbs, I want to help people see that ultimately Jesus is our wisdom (1 Cor. 1:30) and that these proverbs (which are not the same as promises) can only be lived out by the grace given to us in Christ.

Christianity is not about what you have to do but what Christ did. So I am compelled to draw people back to the work Jesus performed on our behalf. Of course God calls us to action. He commands that we kill sin—specific sin—and live righteously. But the only hope we have is that Jesus has perfectly lived righteously and killed sin for us, and that the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead also dwells in us and empowers us to act.

I love all kinds of preaching—thematic, topical, verse-by-verse, creative, filled with meaningful illustrations and well-delivered—as long as it communicates God's Word given to us. Anything else is not preaching. It's just an airing of opinion that evaporates or a dissemination of advice for people to take or leave.

Biblical preaching is much more than that. Biblical preaching gives God's Word to all who will hear. It takes the text, explains what it means—and why it matters—and then points people to Jesus as the goal of the text, prompting them to believe its truths and live out its ways in the power of the Spirit.

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