

Preparing Those Who Preach—  
To Ask the Right Questions  
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Abstract

Ezekiel 34 records God's evaluation of Israel's "pastors". His evaluation leads us to several provocative questions that could help preachers anticipate the pastoral value of their sermons. I'm proposing that teaching the right questions could save many preachers from unhealthy, unhelpful post-sermon evaluation.

The past comes into the present. People sit frantically in their stalled car. The ground shakes as the inevitable draws nearer. In the rear view mirror is the notice, "objects in mirror are closer than they appear." Suddenly the face of the T-Rex materializes in the reflective surface. Panic ensues.

I sometimes feel that panic on Sundays.<sup>1</sup> Soon after services are over I'm unexplainably drawn to the mirror. It lures me and repels me; seduces me to look, yet I fear what I might see. It isn't fear of T-Rex, it's the realization of the enormity of the responsibility<sup>2</sup>. Was I faithful to my calling? Did I get the job done? Was what I said in any way helpful?

Preachers everywhere know the feeling. They enter the pulpit and before them is an audience of listeners. Listeners who have come wanting to know if anything the preacher says will make a difference in their lives in the coming weeks and months. They have come seeking a word from the Lord (though often they don't know that's what they are seeking).

Preaching is an awesome responsibility. The preacher stands on sacred ground. He wades into a hallowed stream. And those who prepare the next generation of preachers have an even more serious burden. A heavy weight of responsibility rests upon the shoulders of those "professors of preaching" who assume responsibility for tomorrow's practitioners.

I'd like to once again bring the past into the present. Not the T-Rex and his counterparts, but the shepherds of Israel. Specifically I'm interested in those shepherds addressed in Ezekiel 34.<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel does not present a flattering picture of Israel's leaders. However, his words prove beneficial when we learn from their failures.

It must be noted that "shepherds" in this passage are Israel's leaders, primarily their kings.<sup>4</sup> They have failed in their responsibility to care for Israel. In verses 1-10 they are soundly condemned for those failures.<sup>5</sup> The remainder of the chapter is God's remedy for their failure. In essence He says, "I will do it Himself." Most scholars believe He is ultimately anticipating the coming of the "good shepherd."<sup>6</sup>

Though we are not “leaders” in the same sense, we find the image of shepherd to be used widely in the New Testament for those whose role is to tend to the flock of God.<sup>7</sup> And it is those shepherds who labor hard in preaching and teaching that bear the greatest burden of responsibility (1 Timothy 5:17-18). Therefore, those categories of concern expressed by Ezekiel may provide insight for those we teach.

By learning from the failures of Israel’s shepherds we may well find questions that lead our students to success in their ministries. If we can teach those under our tutelage to ask the right questions in the context of their sermon preparation, we may prepare a generation of preachers whose sermons will accomplish what Israel’s shepherds did not.

I’m suggesting that asking appropriate questions during the preparation of the sermon will keep a preacher’s sermons in line with the desires of the Chief Shepherd. Examining a sermon in the light of the following questions will prevent the preacher fearing what he may see in the rear view mirror as he reflects on his Sunday morning experience.

The questions are as follows:

1. Does this sermon supply nourishment?
2. Does this sermon bring healing?
3. Does this sermon empower continuation?
4. Does this sermon enable restoration?
5. Does this sermon provide orientation?

1. Does this sermon supply nourishment?

On too many occasions I’ve heard parishioners say, “We’re not being fed.” It’s the common complaint of those who go church hopping. Whether it’s true or not, I’ve never been able to determine. Often those who visit one church because they weren’t fed at another end up visiting yet another church because they were not fed at that one either. However, the very fact that they say they’re not fed is disturbing. Disturbing enough to make a preacher reevaluate the fare.

Teaching people to preach is teaching them to prepare nourishing, appealing meals. We teach them preparation and presentation, nutrition and appeal. Jesus’ instruction to Peter was “feed my lambs” (John 21:15). In reflecting on a life of preaching and teaching Peter could say, “I have written both my letters as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking” (2 Peter 3:1). Peter had given them what they needed in order to think correctly. He had fed them.

Ezekiel’s condemnation of Israel’s shepherds was for self-care. God’s response was, “I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel” (Ezekiel 34:14). The Psalmist said, “You prepare a table for me...” (Psalm 23:5). The preaching we advocate and teach must be preaching that provides “good grazing” and “rich pasture,” i.e., nourishment for the sustenance of the listener.

Therefore we teach people to preach the Bible. Never has it been more important to preach the Scriptures.<sup>8</sup> Therein is food for the sheep. It is in Scripture that we find that by which “the man

of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16). As the Psalmist says, “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth” (Psalm 119:105).

Few would argue that the best preaching for “feeding” people is Biblical preaching; preaching that begins and ends in the text. The preaching that nourishes our listeners is preaching that exposes the meaning of God’s word to the listeners in a way that they can fully comprehend and apply to their lives. If they are given scripture to think about, when they are done digesting our comments, they still have something worthy of their meditation.

But we don’t prepare meals with nutrition alone as our guide. We all want to sit at a table where the chef has also been concerned with presentation. It should appeal to the senses. Sermons, like meals, satisfy most when they are both nutritious and appealing. The presentation should appeal to the listeners, making them want to hear them. The way the meal appears is nearly as important as what the meal consists of. When what we say is substantial, and the way we say it is interesting, then we can affirmatively answer the question, “Does this sermon nourish?” And when it is delivered with appeal, we can rest assured people will sit long enough to absorb the nourishment.

So what might the preacher ask? Here are some sample questions to prompt his evaluative juices. Is the sermon appetizing? Is it healthy? Does it energize? Is it tasty? Does it have sensory appeal? Would I want to eat it? Is it balanced? Is it hearty? Will it stick with me? Will it bring people back to the table? Will it encourage trying other new foods? Did it satisfy? Did it leave me wanting more? Do I walk away, only to be hungry again too quickly? Do I feel as if I’ve over-eaten?

## 2. Does this sermon bring healing?

Each Sunday people walk in the door and sit in the seats, weak and ill. They are in serious need of healing and strengthening. The food the world has fed them has poisoned them and left them without strength. The constant onslaught of misplaced values and misleading lies weakens and drains them of spiritual health and energy.

Ezekiel cried, “the weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed” (vs. 4). God replied, “I will strengthen the weak” (vs. 16). God will see to it that His people are energized to carry on. If there is spiritual illness or weakness, He will see to it there is healing and strength. Jesus said it this way, “come unto me, all you who are weary, and I will give you rest.” Paul said to the Thessalonians, “...encourage the timid, help the weak...” (5:14).

Preaching serves to heal and strengthen. In the context of “proclamation” and “a door for our message,” Paul says we are to let our “conversation be seasoned with salt” (Col. 4:2-6). For the rabbis, “seasoning with salt” was a figure of speech for applying the word of God to the needs of men<sup>9</sup>. This image is one of finding a person’s need, their hurt, and applying the appropriate scripture to that need.

People live in a world that specializes in tearing them apart. The sermon, in the context of worshipping a loving God, should build and heal. Perhaps the words of Paul (spoken not in the context of preaching, nor specifically to preachers) might yet be good for preachers to hear, “do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29).

Preaching scripture both diagnoses and prescribes. There is something about the word of God that allows the Holy Spirit to find the source and not merely the symptom (Hebrews 4:12). Nearly every preacher has had the experience of listening to parishioners reflect on the message they’ve just heard. One will say, “you can’t believe how helpful it was when you said...” At that moment the preacher realizes he did not say that, but God did. Through the power of the preached word, God spoke (1 Thessalonians 2:12). A disease was diagnosed, a weakness was identified, and healing began. Such is the incredible power of preaching the Bible.

What do people hear when they come to that portion of worship we call preaching? Do they hear a word of grace (Col. 4:6) or a word of condemnation? Do they leave feeling more mauled than mended, more rebuked than reborn, more hurt than healed? Was there a word of grace in the sermon that echoed the healing words of God, “I will heal their waywardness and love them freely...” (Hosea 14:4)?

What questions does the preacher interested in a healing, strengthening message ask? Does this sermon diagnose, or merely prescribe? Am I aiming at causes or symptoms? Will the listener feel better when they leave? Will they understand the disease? Will they know the cause of their weakness? Will they have something practical they can do? Will they have a realistic solution? Do they know how much and how often? Have they been warned of the side effects? Do they have a sense of how long it might take to heal? Do they know it’s okay to hurt? Are they aware that some sickness is self-induced? Will they be stronger? Do they sense the physician cares?

3. Does this sermon empower continuation?

Ezekiel speaks of shepherds failing to “bind up the broken” (vs. 4). Undoubtedly he has injured sheep in mind. Rather than leave the injured to fend for themselves (vs. 8), God promises to “bind up” the broken. He will see that they are able to continue the journey. They are not to be left behind nor forsaken.

Shepherds were responsible to watch the sheep. They were to notice when one of the sheep appeared to be having trouble. Shepherds looked for wounds from thorns and attacks. They checked to see that hooves were in tact. They monitored the terrain to short circuit attempts to separate the weak. Shepherds carefully assessed every sheep to ensure it was able to continue.

Preaching, worthy of the name, enables listeners to continue, to go another day, to take another step. Preaching, pastoral words from a pastoral heart, binds up the broken and gives them the power to continue the journey. Preaching addresses the multiple issues in every audience and recognizes that no two sheep are exactly alike. Preaching takes into account the varied needs of the injured. Preaching warns of the dangers inherent in leaving the pasture or the path. Preaching provides adequate direction for the journey.

Every Sunday people enter community worship with hearts broken by unfaithful spouses, unfair employment practices, inhumane business dealings, unbelievable life circumstances. They come hobbling into worship victimized by unfortunate miscalculations on their own part. Some having suffered injury due to no responsibility of their own, while others have been their own worst enemies. Yet they come, looking to the Great Physician's assistant for some sense of hope and courage.

The concerned preacher will ask, "Will this sermon encourage or discourage those who hear? Will this message mediate healing in broken lives? Does the message inflict more guilt than grace? Does it provide the needed crutch to help carry the load? Does the sermon communicate the community concern? Will the listener know that God extends grace even to our poor judgment? Does the sermon bind a wound or wound more deeply? Does the sermon enable me to keep going? Are the directions clear? Is there motivation to continue? Is there encouragement that justifies the effort? Is there warning of the dangers? Is there honest assessment of the difficulty inherent in the journey? Is there adequate guidance to know the boundaries and the destination?"

#### 4. Does this sermon enable restoration?

Sheep fail to look far beyond their faces while they eat. They simply go from one tuft of grass to another. As a result they sometimes find themselves separated from the rest of the flock. However, if the shepherd is doing his job, they are never far from their sheep. Sheep may wander, shepherds don't.

Wandering was not a phenomenon known only to Israel. The early Church faced the problem too. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel" (Galatians 1:6) Again, he warned Timothy that "some have wandered from the faith" (1 Timothy 6:10, 21) and some "have shipwrecked their faith" (1 Timothy 1:20). Jude, the brother of Jesus, instructed his readers to "be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh" (Jude 22-23).

The problem continues to exist. People are distracted by the things of the world (Matthew 13:22; 2 Timothy 4:10). They are enticed by the lure of greener pastures. They have a hard time staying connected to an ancient gospel. And in today's world there are multiple pastures being proffered. Multiple messages come everyday that there is grass for the taking, if only the person will....

Ezekiel says more about this than any other concern. "You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost" (vs. 4); "so they were scattered because there was no shepherd" (vs. 5); "My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth..." (vs. 6). Ezekiel's vocabulary may even reflect having been "driven" away.

Yet God never gives up. Ezekiel records His voice: "I myself will search for my sheep" (vs. 11); "I will search for the lost and bring back the strays" (vs. 16). Hosea says, "Therefore I am now

going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her” (Hosea 2:14). The preacher asks, does the sermon on Sunday give the listener any hope that God wants them back? Is there any sense that I am free to return? Is there any direction given?

The preacher asks, does this sermon provide adequate instructions for a return trip? Does it sound a note of grace and mercy, inviting the wandering home? Does it signal the right direction to move? Does it tell the sheep the location of the shepherd? Does it help the sheep locate the safe pasture? Does it entice the wandering sheep back to the fold? Is it clear? Is it inviting? Does it spell out what is involved? Does the sermon communicate God’s broken heart? Does it sound voice of a waiting father?

##### 5. Does this sermon provide orientation?

The other side of restoration is attraction. Is it possible that we can preach in such a way that people can find a new direction in life? Ezekiel speaks not only of the “strays” but also of the “lost.” It’s one thing to preach in such a way that those who are struggling can get reoriented. One may preach in a way that those who are headed in a faulty direction can get redirected. But it’s another matter altogether to preach in such a way that those who are lost get found.

“Straying” is not without its anxious moments. But it’s still not being “lost.” Straying implies you can stick your head up, scan the horizon and realize you may be off the beaten path, you may be separated from the flock, but you can see your way back. “Lost” implies loss of any recognition of where you are. There is no “reorienting” because you were never “oriented”. There is the need for the complete redirection of one’s life.

Can preaching reach one who is out of touch with the shepherd? Is it possible for preaching to provide enough persuasion to totally sway a lost sheep into coming home? Apparently Paul thought so. He claimed it was “the foolishness of preaching” that God used to “save those who believed.” Jesus came “preaching.” He thought preaching would work to locate the lost and give them motive to come home.

Herein is a preacher’s dilemma. Does he preach attraction or correction? And the answer must be “yes.” He preaches to feed and heal and guide the sheep. And he preaches so sheep are aware of the dangers. He preaches in a way that keeps the sheep away from the brinks of disaster. He preaches in a way that the sheep know where and what the dangers actually are. But sermons must also give a new sense of hope. Sermons must redefine home. Sermons must spell out the necessary terms of reorientation.

The preacher asks, does this sermon make the path so clear that even those unfamiliar with the territory sense it’s the right path to take? Does this sermon cause me want to go in a certain direction, possibly unaware of where it may take me? Does this sermon have the power to interest the disinterested? Can this sermon take the sheep who doesn’t even know that it’s lost and convince it that it lives in dangerous territory? Does the message mark the boundaries clearly and convincingly? Does the sermon make known the character and nature of “sheephood”? Will I know God’s expectations when I’m through listening to the sermon? Will I hear the voice of God calling?

Dr. J.K. Jones, professor of preaching at Lincoln Christian College, maintains that “a good question is worth a thousand answers.” Of course those of us who “prepare those who preach” must give some answers. We must tell prospective preachers the basics of exegesis, exposition and homiletics. We must encourage them to preach the text and show them how. We must provide them with methods and models.

But beyond that, might they be better served if we simply gave them some helpful questions? Could it be that the questions of Martin Luther might be of more value than our answers? Might the questions of Dietrich Bonhoeffer prove more insightful than our instruction?

I’m not suggesting the questions presented in this paper are of the magnitude of those of Luther or Bonhoeffer (see appendix). But I am suggesting that these simple questions—“Does this sermon teach? Does it heal? Does it empower? Does it restore? Does it reorient?”—might help those whom we teach to prevent some unwanted post-sermon trauma from occurring.

Not every sermon must answer all these questions. But every sermon should answer at least one of them. And every course of sermons should answer them. If every preacher would ask every sermon in every series these questions, listeners would certainly not suffer the way the people of Israel suffered under their shepherds. And if we, Christ’s “under-shepherds” did our job, God may not feel compelled to “do it himself.”

#### Appendix:

These questions are as I have heard them, adapted from Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Martin Luther’s 9 questions:

1. Do you teach/preach systematically?
2. Do you have a ready wit (humor)?
3. Are you eloquent? (wordsmithing)
4. Are you caring for your voice?
5. Do you have a good memory?
6. Do you know when to end?
7. Are you sure of your doctrine?
8. Will you risk body, blood, wealth, honor to preach? (courage)
9. Will you allow yourself to be mocked and jeered?

#### Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

1. Was the sermon faithful to the scriptures?
2. Was the sermon faithful to this particular text?
3. Was the sermon faithful to the great doctrines?
4. Was the sermon faithful to the congregation?
5. Was the sermon faithful to the great commission?
6. Was the sermon believable?
7. Did the sermon cause the listener to want to look at the passage again?
8. Did the sermon proclaim good news?

## Bibliography

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to my responsibility to teach preaching at Lincoln Christian Seminary I have the privilege of preaching at Madison Park Christian Church in Quincy, IL. Each week they graciously give me three chances to get it right.

<sup>2</sup> For an interesting reflection on this dilemma see Anderson, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> This paper is not an attempt to thoroughly exegete this text, but rather, to allow the imagery to evoke ideas.

<sup>4</sup> At this point one must be careful not to press the analogy. I'm not suggesting the preaching minister in the local congregation has either responsibility or authority like the kings of Israel. However, "in keeping with the shepherd's role as leader and provider, biblical pastoral writings often picture civil and religious leaders as shepherds and the people as sheep." Ryken, L., 2000, c1998, pg. 782.

<sup>5</sup> Since the unworthy shepherds care more for themselves than for their charges and have plundered them rather than searched for them, God will hold them accountable, remove them from their posts and take away their livelihood (Ezek 34:8-10). Out of this situation comes the promise of a shepherd from the line of David who will genuinely care for the people (Ezek 34:23), Ryken, 2000, pg. 783.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, 1969; Daniel L. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25-48*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, 1998; Iain M. Duguid, *Ezekiel*, The NIV Application Commentary, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 4:11 (pastor-teachers); 1 Peter 5:1-4 (shepherds/elders); Acts 20:28-29 (shepherds).

<sup>8</sup> Recent Homiletics books seem to emphasize a common message. E.g., see Shaddix, 2003, and Lawson, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> According to Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, Hermeneia, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971, pg. 169.