

Preaching for Spiritual Formation: Using the Sermon to Move Individuals Toward a Deeper Relationship with the Lord

Kenneth E. Bickel, Grace Theological Seminary
Christy M. Hill, Grace Theological Seminary

Abstract

Spiritual formation seeks to create a context where Christians can experience a deepening relationship with God. The deepening of this relationship depends on knowledge of God and knowledge of self. This paper asserts that sermons can constitute a vital part of creating this context for those individuals who find their spiritual nourishment primarily in a large-gathering worship service. Preaching content as well as effective forms of communication will be discussed in light of the relational emphasis of spiritual formation.

Introduction

This paper is written for the pastor who preaches regularly and for the preacher who houses a pastor's heart. It arises out of a desire to confront several realities that collide, including the following:

- Preachers with a pastor's heart are not satisfied with preaching merely to provide information, or simply to stir emotions, or to use engaging communicative skills to build a larger church. They desire deeply to see their listeners more conformed to the image of Jesus Christ as a result of their preaching.
- Most preachers face the reality that the arena where they can bring the Word of God to the most people at one sitting is the main worship service(s) of the local church.
- Most worship services continue to maintain a culture where preaching is predominantly a monologue. Even if there is good audience feedback during the sermon, the proclamation of biblical truth flows almost entirely from the preacher to the listeners.
- Monologues are generally considered to be an inferior model of communication—that is, inferior to two-way discussion or hands-on, self-discovery of information¹—especially in an age that desires interactive acquisition of information.²

If these realities are admitted, then questions arise:

- Can preachers structure the content and emphases of their preaching to focus more intentionally on helping listeners form a deeper personal relationship with the Lord?
- Can such intentionality be accomplished in a meaningful way by means of a monologue?

- Will such intentionality justify the de-emphasizing of other purposes (seemingly alternative purposes) than might be accomplished by preaching with different objectives in mind?
- Are there forms of preaching that might serve the purpose of spiritual formation in the listeners better than other forms?

Definitions, Descriptions and Contrasts

We wish to be as clear as possible in describing what we mean by spiritual formation. James Wilhoit captures the essence with which we agree: “Christian spiritual formation refers to the intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.”³

The overarching aspiration and the core pursuit

The *Westminster Catechism* defines the chief end of man: *To glorify God and enjoy Him forever*. Seeking the glory of God in everything as the appropriate overarching desire of all our efforts is understood (1 Cor. 10:31).

Following that overarching aspiration, the core, intentional pursuit of spiritual formation is a deeper, richer personal relationship with the Lord. This correlates with Jesus’ teaching that loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength is the greatest command (Matt. 22:37-38). Experiencing a deeper love for God comes from a relationship that encompasses an ever greater awareness of the believer’s true identity in Christ, a relationship that is becoming more experiential and emotional, and a relationship that includes as well the element of the mystical.

The means of progress, broadly stated

We believe deeper, richer relationships between believers and the Lord are increasingly accomplished as those believers progress into a greater, in-depth understanding of themselves, and into greater, multi-faceted interactions with the triune God. This corresponds nicely with the opening sentence of Book 1 of John Calvin’s *Institutes*: “Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”⁴ This double knowledge (of self and God) is an experiential knowledge, where correct information is applied to the believer’s life and deep beliefs are changed because he or she is persuaded of the truth.

We hasten to add that our conviction is that deep belief change is one of the roles of the Holy Spirit. For example, He is the One who convicts the world of guilt (John 16:8), enlightens believers’ minds to spiritual truth (1 Cor. 2:10-16) and teaches us that God is our “Abba, Father” (Rom. 8:15-16). Therefore, spiritual growth is a relational process, dependent upon correct experiential information, and empowered by the One who lives inside the believer.

Outcomes that give evidence of progress

Spiritual formation might be described as well by some of its more important outcomes. We believe that those who are being spiritually formed will exhibit:

- Growing trust in the Lord, trust that He is close by (that is, that we are not alone, existential loneliness being a vital part of the Fall⁵) and trust that He is good.
- Growing conformity to the Lord, both in attitude and action.
- Growing commitment to service for the Lord, as an outgrowth of love for Him and love for others.
- Growing dedication to the worship of the Lord, both privately and corporately expressed.
- Growing stability for life in Him in a fallen and fractured world.
- Growing freedom to present themselves authentically to God and others.
- Growing realization that things that used to bring deep satisfaction (e.g., approval, success, accomplishments) do so less and less.
- Growing hunger for God that competes with all other hungers—regardless of circumstances and relational difficulties.
- Growing aptitude for hearing God’s voice more clearly through Scripture, prayer and interaction with the Christian community.
- Growing dissatisfaction with life at the deepest levels, which leads to an increasing attachment to the Hope that nothing in this world can fulfill.⁶

Spiritual Formation Contrasted with Discipleship

Some readers might well question the distinction between spiritual formation and what Christians of our culture popularly understand when they speak of discipleship. While admitting that there is significant overlap of these two processes, discipleship (again, as that term is commonly used in evangelical North America) is more oriented toward helping believers grow in their understanding of Christian doctrine and in helping believers achieve greater consistency of godly habits—notably Bible reading, prayer, soul winning, Christian service and good stewardship. The danger with these as the goal is that a believer may pursue outward conformity by the power of the self and continue a life primarily founded on self reliance. So, as good as those orientations may be, spiritual formation focuses more intently on helping believers grow in their union with the Lord, abiding in the Vine and letting their fruit be an outcome of an ever deepening relationship. Greater conformity to the image of Jesus Christ is then pursued (but only accomplished by the Holy Spirit) out of that context.

Preaching for Worldview Change

Spiritual Formation and the Listener's Worldview

Too often preachers focus on getting people to change their behavior without helping them to evaluate their deep beliefs.⁷ The sermon is often seen as a time focused on helping people understand and apply God's Word to their daily life. Unfortunately, people will not apply in an authentic way what they do not deeply believe. The problem is that the truth of God's Word remains at a superficial level and the God who disclosed the truth has not been deeply engaged. Can a sermon help people to relate to God more deeply? Is it possible for a person to be drawn more experientially into double knowledge (experiential knowledge of God and self) while a preacher is delivering the message? Instead of seeing the sermon as a tool to help people understand and apply God's Word (cognitive and behavioral goals), preachers need to see the sermon as an opportunity to develop a person's worldview by helping their listeners relate to God more deeply. In this paper, we assert that it is not only possible to engage listeners on this level, but it is vitally important if preaching is going to contribute to the spiritual growth of those the preachers shepherd.

A discrepancy between what the Bible says and what one lives is an indicator of a deep belief that has not been fully persuaded by the light of truth. Everyone has deep beliefs and presuppositions about life that guide interpretations of the data received daily. One's mindset includes "characteristic ways of thinking, core convictions about where life is found, thematic and patterned images, and ideas about how to make life work."⁸ This is one's operant belief system, which may be very different from one's professed belief system.

In order to address this discrepancy between the operant and professed belief system, preachers must articulate their own struggle to truly believe the truth. The natural human tendency is to move toward homeostasis, a state of stability.⁹ Therefore, listeners may defend themselves against the truth of themselves (that their operant belief system is different than God's Word) if they are confronted with something that makes them disequibrated or uncomfortable. Preachers who show a willingness to model a growing awareness of the truth of themselves during the worship service create a safe place for listeners to do the same. It communicates the underlying message that it is permitted to not be perfect and that growth happens when we stop pretending and finally come out of hiding about who we are. The metavirtue is honesty.¹⁰

Piaget's cognitive learning theory may shed light on how preaching for worldview change happens.¹¹ When listeners' presuppositions and categories can no longer explain bits of evidence that fall outside preconceived ideas, they are forced to create new categories and think in different ways. Disequilibrium prompts a desire for resolution. Biblical truth needs to be applied to ingrained ways of thinking so that the Word increasingly grows as the interpretive framework for what life is about. When the Spirit-empowered individual deals accurately with new data and circumstances that cause disequilibrium, cognitive growth produces a paradigm shift. One's worldview is slowly being transformed and spiritual formation is happening.

One way to help people relate to Christ during the sermon is to find places where they are feeling disequibrated by life and help them to see how relationship with God brings stability and needed balance. Preaching does not necessarily need to intentionally disequilibrate, but it does need to explain how the truth of a passage might address one's disequibration. Preachers need to point out the places where people already feel disequibrated, where incorrect formulas for life come up short and how the Truth of the Word interacts with them on that level. Some ideas:

- Highlight our common disappointments or admit to a sense of disillusionment with how things are and our inability to achieve our goals for a life that feels abundant.
- Instead of sermons that make people feel like they can be in control (How to have a happy marriage; God's principles for financial success), we need to address the reality that we cannot make life cooperate with our smaller visions of life—even as a Christian.
- Give hope that there is a reason we come to the end of our rope in our conceptualization and contentment of life; it is there that we exchange our small horizons for God's grander horizons for Life that is truly life. St. John of the Cross is purported to have said, "How will a person brought to birth and nurtured in a world of small horizons rise up to you, Lord, if you do not raise him by your hand which made him?"

Can preaching address this phenomenon and make it okay for people to get in touch with deeper longings than just to have a pleasant life (small horizons)? Do we trust that there is a longing in the human soul that only intimacy with the Divine lover of our souls can fill? We need to help people put words to the phenomenon of disequibration and unarticulated longings in order use them as a way to connect with God.

Worldview Formation: The Listener's Understanding of Self

As explained above, we believe that one primary means for believers to pursue a richer personal relationship with the Lord is to enter into a greater, in-depth understanding of themselves. Agreeing with that contention leads naturally to abundant topics that can be addressed by means of a sermon. Said topics include the following possibilities:

- **How the *Imago Dei* might be described and understood.** This includes God's original intention for humans to be image bearers, not image seekers. Humans were created to be stewards and co-regents, representing Him in this world. Our identity is bestowed, we do not have to create it.
- **How the Fall affected the *Imago Dei*.** The foundational experience of broken relationship with God and others promotes unhealthy strategies to deal with life. Seeing how the Fall produced the common human experience of fear, shame, covering and hiding can be seen in all genres of Scripture.
- **How new birth through Christ provides hope of a new way of life, not just forgiveness of sins.** The whole process of salvation (justification, sanctification and

glorification) needs to be preached in relational terms. Each part of the process is accomplished through believers recognizing their neediness for God's intervention and rescue, surrendering to Him and trusting Him to do His good work. God's redemptive solutions in the Old Testament need to be tied into the culmination of His self-disclosure: the person of Jesus Christ. The New Testament continues to unpack the person, work and teaching of Jesus so that a follower of Jesus might live a new life abiding in Him.

- **How people should see themselves as a new creation, hidden in Christ with a new identity that has been given by God Himself.** This means Christians are spiritual beings, not perfect yet, but being transformed by the Spirit. He is a person living inside us. His presence counteracts the relational effects of the Fall: our existential loneliness, fear, shame and strategies of denial by hiding, posing and pretending. Growing in this spiritual relationship provides a safe place for believers to be honest about their struggles to trust, believe and live according to truth and love.
- **How people should see themselves as relational, rational, volitional, social, physical and emotional beings.** The cause of sin is spiritual and must be addressed in that domain. But growth in freedom from sin may need to be addressed in other domains that correlate to false operant beliefs. These domains are influenced by deep beliefs that may not have been reflected upon or understood in light of truth. God's Word promotes the understanding that humans are complex and have domains of life that are developed over time and experience. Preaching must relate the truth of Scripture to the false beliefs that mar the experience of freedom in these domains so that holistic growth may occur.

A Special Focus on Denial

In addition to these foundational matters of biblical anthropology, other matters not commonly addressed could be explained, illustrated, and applied well in sermons. For example, the issue of living in denial, we believe, deprives too many believers of the opportunity for relational health and spiritual growth. People are natural masters at eschewing responsibility, denying culpability, and living in blissful unawareness of some of their deeply held, but controlling beliefs—beliefs that often do great damage. Likewise, too many Christians live in blissful unawareness that their chosen strategies of life are so often not merely evidences of their personal idiosyncrasies, but represent sinful actions and reactions that cause wave after wave of damage.

Living in denial robs the believer of the opportunity to traverse through genuine confession, repentance, the receiving of gracious forgiveness and the restoration of peaceful relationships, both vertically and horizontally considered. This journey, needfully repeated many times in the believer's life, provides for growth in spiritual formation. Preachers who take great pains to explain, illustrate and apply these realities for their listeners will surely provide a more fertile context in which the Holy Spirit will work to accomplish formation in the believer's life.

Preaching for an Appropriate Acceptance of Self

We have made reference above to the belief that the new birth through Christ provides hope, but not perfection yet. It is true that we humans are profoundly sinful beings. The depths of our depravity include selfish passions, false beliefs, deceitful pursuits, egocentric strategies and

badly handled emotions. This depravity extends to attitudes, words, actions and reactions that could conceptually compete with Hitler and Stalin. Because of this, preachers do need to preach about sin in all its forms, the need for listeners to admit their extensive capacity for sin, as well as their need to turn away from sin by the power of the Spirit.

However, to scream human depravity and only whisper human dignity is to present an imbalanced biblical anthropology. We have been created in the image of God and while that image has been marred by the fall, it has not been obliterated. God has outfitted humans not only to function on a vastly higher plane than other earthly creatures, He has also enabled individuals to generate artistic masterpieces, to plumb the depths of scientific findings, to contemplate themselves with great insight and to accomplish a myriad of tasks that enrich our lives here on this earth. Then, when those individuals discover that Jesus Christ is their Savior and give themselves to Him as their Lord, He transforms them into new creatures—old things pass away, new things take their place. They become adopted children of God with enlightened minds and softened hearts. They are gifted by the Holy Spirit to accomplish things that are immeasurable in meaning and eternal in their extent. God Himself dwells within them and communes with them, and accepts them as beloved co-heirs with Christ.

More could be added, but hopefully enough has been said to make the point—as believers look at themselves in the metaphorical mirror, they need to see not only their depravity but, as of equal importance, their God-given dignity as well. An appropriate acceptance of self for Christians is to acknowledge and embrace this ongoing balance of depravity and dignity while they wait for God’s final sanctifying work in the future. This appropriate view of self even extends to the need for Christians to become “accepting” of their ongoing sinfulness, not that they should ever give up a quest to put off the old nature and put on the new nature through the renewing of the mind as empowered by the Spirit. It is just that all of us who are honest acknowledge that, in the really meaningful areas of our lives, increasing conformity to Jesus Christ is a gradual, lifelong process. As we continue that long journey in the same direction, believers need to believe deeply that God’s grace is sufficient to cover their ongoing sinfulness until it is finally completed by the Lord Himself.

An unwillingness in believers to “accept” their ongoing sinfulness has some unfortunate consequences, including the tendencies 1) to cover up and deny their ongoing sinfulness, to others and to themselves, 2) to rob themselves of experiencing the depths of God’s fatherly graciousness toward His imperfect children, and 3) to not enjoy their relationship with their God to the extent that He wants them to enjoy it (and benefit from it). To adopt this attitude of “acceptance” is to embrace their ongoing weakness as imperfect children of God and to strengthen their sense of dependence on God to live honorably before Him (revisit 2 Cor. 12:9-10).

This represents yet another fruitful and quite theological set of topics for preaching for spiritual formation. It might well take some God-given creativity to communicate these thoughts concretely enough for ideas that are delivered via a monologue, but we believe it can be done, and done in a compelling way.

Suggested forms of communication

Immediately above we suggest that communicating many of the ideas consistent with the promotion of spiritual formation could well call for creative means of communication in order that the communication might be delivered as concretely as possible. Some of these possible means of communication include:

- *Story.* Stories of personal discovery and spiritual advancement can be very encouraging. Especially effective are those stories found in preachers' own vulnerable vignettes where they share how they became aware of deep beliefs that were contrary to the truth of God's Word. This would mean modeling for the listeners how to analyze one's own heart, that is, seeking to look at behavior, motives, attitudes and value systems that lie below the surface of easily accessible consciousness (see Prov. 14:15; 20:5 for the call to do so).
- *Testimonies.* Fortunately, in an age where vulnerability is more acceptable,¹² stories of others' discoveries of their own true beliefs and motivations are more readily available. This could include accounts of how individuals came to realize their own determination to live in denial, and how that damaged themselves and others. Further, great blessing can be realized by hearing others' testimonies that describe the nature of their relationships with the Lord. This might include describing the richness of relationship with the Lord and what has contributed to this deeper experience of God. Having individuals share a well thought-out testimony describing their journey of self-discovery and deepening connection with the Lord serves to allow a greater part of the Body of Christ to share in the sermonic event.
- *Journal entries.* A subset of the above could take the form of thoughts and prayers that are recorded in the journal entries of those given to that discipline. Especially effective for other men would be those thoughts that are written and read by men who are well respected in the congregation. As some see men and women vocalizing their poignant musings, example could well serve as an encouragement for others to take up, and benefit from, that discipline.
- *Movie Clips or Examples from Mainstream Culture.* Using or accurately describing scenes from movies or TV shows, the preacher might show how to analyze underlying messages that quietly shape the belief systems of those exposed to such media. Revealing how they correspond to, or contradict, a biblical worldview not only provides correction but models how to become more discerning while experiencing the secular media.
- *Skits.* Think about how easy it would be to find or write a skit that would, for example, demonstrate the sophisticated moves people can employ to live in denial. Especially effective would be those skits that do not just make light of that strategy, but instead show how damaging it can be to relationships. Likewise, skits that are overt in uncovering deeply held beliefs and motivations can provide concrete examples and models for discernment to listeners.
- *Music.* Contemporary music has become very sophisticated in exploring the depths of personal insight and feelings. Using such art not only communicates through the long

valued medium of poetry but also includes melody, which can have a strong impact upon the emotions. Given the latter reality, we believe it would be wise to urge listeners to focus on the thoughts while they enjoy the melody so that they can reflect on those thoughts and engage in personal interaction with the Lord as the Spirit leads.

- *Object lessons.* Consider the box turtle. What an example to set before the audience of the kind of creature that, when scared, draws within its shell and ponders nothing. The turtle's only dedication at that point is self-oriented protection. That's fine behavior for a box turtle but it epitomizes tragic behavior for humans.
- *Feedback possibilities.* As technology becomes more mainstream in the worship setting, Wi-Fi access could be utilized by those listeners who might wish to respond to the preacher's thoughts, even in the midst of the message. Testimonies, journal-like thoughts and even questions might be sent to a blog-like electronic page and thus provide real-time feedback. Should the sermon be paused for a musical interlude (for worship through singing, or for reflection) feedback comments could be reviewed during that time for possible response as the sermon picks back up once again. Thus, a form of dialogue could be achieved but direction and closure for the sermon would not need to be sacrificed.

Conclusion

Preachers have an important role to play in shaping the spiritual lives of their listeners. They are entrusted with casting a vision for a new way of thinking about life, for a new way of relating to God and for developing a listener's understanding and acceptance of self as a fallen creature, yet a new creation through Christ.

While some methods have been explored in this paper, preachers do well when they realize that casting this vision comes not only through their verbal communication—carefully chosen words, illustrations and techniques—but, more primarily, through their nonverbal communication: how they live out their own lives. The old adage is true. “You can't lead where you haven't been.” Preachers model their own relationship with God, and so, become living illustrations for deep belief change and worldview formation. The more self-aware and transparent preachers are about their own longings, struggles and disillusionment, the more reinforcement they give to their listeners to follow suit. This level of self-awareness leads to a sense of neediness and neediness can then lead to a sense of wanting what God has to offer: rest for the weary, spiritual sustenance for the empty and clothes of righteousness for the sin-stained. Knowledge of God is not something one puts on in superficial application; instead, the Lord Himself becomes the lifeline for survival.

In all of this, a paradigm shift must take place. Much of preaching is seen as helping people understand and apply God's Word. While these cognitive and behavioral elements are part of the spiritual formation process, they become distractions to deep formation if they become the goal. Instead, understanding God's Word ought to be seen as a means to an end—the end being experiential knowledge of God—that is, relationship. Application of God's Word can then become a by-product of resting more deeply in the truth and trusting in the One who said the

truth. People change behaviorally when their deep beliefs change. Their deep beliefs change when they are confronted with evidence that persuades them to exchange false beliefs for something that fits more cohesively with what they are experiencing as reality.

These paradigm shifts can be articulated, modeled and encouraged through the preaching ministry of the local church. Instead of preaching to help people get better or feel better, we recommend preaching to help people increase in double knowledge (knowledge of God and knowledge of self). A natural state of disequilibrium will arise between what is and what should be. This experience of seeing the truth of the self in light of the truth of God is the environment to encourage listeners to more honestly relate to God.

¹ Jennifer K. Knight, and William B. Wood, "Teaching More by Lecturing Less," *Cell Biology Education* Vol. 4 (Winter 2005): 298–310.

² Leonard Sweet, "And the Glory Crowns the Mercy Seat." Paper delivered to the Evangelical Homiletics Society, October 18, 2002, 5. See also: Leonard Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999), 27-138.

³ James Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 23.

⁴ John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion, Volume 1*
<http://www.reformed.org/books/institutes/books/book1/bk1ch01.html> accessed 8/14/08.

⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 631. See also Robert W. Kelleman, *Soul Physicians: A Theology of Soul Care and Spiritual Direction* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 2007), 246.

⁶ Adapted and expanded from Larry Crabb's "Real Change for Real Community" Workshop delivered at The Spiritual Formation Forum, Long Beach, CA, May 2006.

⁷ Dallas Willard describes this masterfully in *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), 307.

⁸ Kelleman, *Soul Physicians*, 155.

⁹ Herbert L. Petri, *Motivation: Theory and Research* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1981), 7.

¹⁰ John Coe, director of the Institute for Spiritual Formation, Talbot School of Theology, uses this phrase often in his class lectures.

¹¹ *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, "Cognitive Development"
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_g2699/is_0004/ai_2699000417 accessed 6/28/2008

¹² Indeed, the emerging generation (20-somethings) not only finds vulnerability more acceptable, they require it. See David Kinnaman, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 54-60.