

# All I Want is a Practical Theology of Preaching

By Scott M. Gibson

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching,  
rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,  
so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.  
2 Timothy 3:16

## *Abstract*

This article explores the definition and implications of a practical theology of preaching. The author argues that preaching is part of the discipleship process, a presupposition often assumed by preachers but not necessarily acknowledged in their preparation and practice. The article begins with an exploration of the purpose of preaching and then leads the reader through theological and practical matters that underscore the role of preaching in discipleship. The article is written with the thoughtful pastor in view.

## **Introduction**

I'm a preacher. I love to communicate God's word to men and women and boys and girls. The opportunity to help someone grow in their faith, overcome obstacles, gain fresh insight when confronting a troubling sinful habit, experience joy in living the Christian life—all of these and much more propel me as a preacher.

But I don't just preach. I don't simply stand in front of a congregation to hear myself talk, at least that's not what I think preaching is about. But, I want to know what it is about. I want to know what it means to be a preacher, to be confident in what God wants me to do and be in the ministry of preaching.

All I want is a practical theology of preaching. I want to know why I do what I do. I know that preaching isn't a monotone droning on Sunday morning. Preaching isn't "the fine art of talking in someone else's sleep," as Haddon Robinson quips. Nor it is an informational lecture on the long ago and far away in the Old or New Testaments. Preaching is more than that, isn't it?

I want a practical theology. I'm not saying pure theology isn't practical, but I want to see theological wisdom inform the process and practice and even planning of preaching. There are theologies of preaching, some speak to the

phenomenological, existential and philosophical. There are the Christ-centered, God-centered, and historical-redemptive theologies. Typological and allegorical theologies with their hermeneutics can also be found. There are more. And however many there are, all of them certainly have practical implications. Some ignore the authority of the Bible while others emphasize human experience over the text. Some advance formulaic methods and hermeneutical presuppositions that grow out of their theological or philosophical assumptions. But few, if any seem to speak to why we preach.

Maybe we've not asked what it is that drives preaching. Is the purpose of preaching simply to put together a sermon? I hope not! Theologies of preaching unknowingly may not have the actual congregation in mind. Methodologies and theologies of preaching may provide patterns for crafting sermons, but the reason why sermons are constructed appears illusive.

### **The Purpose of Preaching**

Augustine said that the purpose of preaching was to explain, edify and persuade.<sup>i</sup> One cannot argue these rhetorical elements are part of what it means to preach. But why is the preacher to explain, edify and persuade? This leads to a deeper question about the intent of preaching.

Paul's instructions in his second letter to Timothy about preaching, reflects Christ's directives given before he ascended into heaven (Matt. 28:16-20). Jesus told his disciples to make disciples, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything" he had commanded and taught them. Now Paul encourages his disciple in the faith to consider his mentor's life, to be aware that as a preacher he will face some of the same challenges, and that he has the responsibility to communicate the Scriptures to others.

Preaching is discipleship. Paul tells Timothy that the Scripture is the basis from which teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness of men and women as disciples of Jesus is derived. The teaching is the teaching of Jesus, the correct understanding of God and all his attributes and wonder. Rebuking is correcting false belief. Whereas teaching and rebuking concerns right thinking, correcting and training in righteousness has to do with right living. The outcome of this engagement with the Scripture results in change lives: "so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (3:17). Growth of the believer is an on-going expectation.<sup>ii</sup>

In light of this instruction, Paul then tells Timothy in the following verses that he is to preach the Word in all circumstances (4:1-5). Preaching is a means of

discipleship, a shaping of men and women into the people God wants them to be, growing, deep believers, able to face the world in which they live because they have been nurtured to do so by the Word.

Preaching is discipleship. Preaching is not all of what it means to shape believers in Jesus Christ, but it certainly is integral, and a presupposition necessary to preaching that is often overlooked. If more preachers came to the responsibility of preaching—text selection, planning, sermon construction—with the understanding that they are nurturing disciples, their preaching might look different.

Preaching as discipleship gives preachers a more meaningful way of approaching those to whom they speak. No longer are they an audience or even a congregation, they are believers, followers of Jesus Christ, disciples.

There is a dangerous pastoral theology that neglects to recognize that the pastor is a discipler. “Sure, that’s what my preaching is about,” says one preacher. But sermon planning reflects more of her interests rather than the disciple. Sermon preaching may appear to be more of a performance—about how the preacher looks or sounds or comes across—than how preaching fits into the overall ministry of a pastor who feeds his flock.

Our experience can reflect Jesus’ experience. He was preaching among the crowds and noticed their pain and need, “He had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36). He was moved deeply within, to his guts.

We want to know our listeners so well that we are moved by what they are experiencing. We want to know them so we’re able to take their spiritual temperature and preach sermons that teach them how they can live lives of obedience and joy in a troubled world.

Stuart Briscoe notes, “Sitting in my congregation on any given Sunday are a multitude of needs and expectations, levels of maturity and orientations. And I’m supposed to offer a preaching menu to nourish every one of them. That means I’ve got to be an intentional biblical nutritionist.”<sup>iii</sup>

There are different levels and layers of spiritual maturity in any congregation. Yet, congregations vary from one to another. Some are more mature, while others are less spiritually vibrant. These factors come into play when a preacher considers what to preach. Spurgeon agrees, “The careful shepherd often examines his flock, and governs his mode of treatment by the state in which he finds it.”<sup>iv</sup>

But maybe preaching has lost its essential role of being considered a component of discipleship. One pastor admits, “My listeners come for worship, for friends, for music—not to hear a sermon.”<sup>v</sup> Listeners agree. “After 56 years of steady church-going there is nothing in my spirituality that I can attribute to a sermon,” notes a church attender. “Everything good came from one-on-one contact outside the church service.”<sup>vi</sup> This is tragic.

But there are preachers who have given up on the critical role of preaching in nurturing believers. “When I first became a pastor, I took the preaching thing very seriously,” says one pastor. “Now, I don’t... [More can happen] through private conversation.”<sup>vii</sup>

In her study on preaching, Lori Carrell observed, “Thirty-five percent of listeners in this study say the sermon ‘impacts my spiritual life’ more than any other part of the church experience.”<sup>viii</sup> Why is this number low? There must be a disconnect between the pulpit and the pew, between the pastor and the flock.

What does this mean for the preacher? For one, it means, as John Kern of the late nineteenth century advises:

Therefore study people; know the souls before you. Know what they read; know their doubts, their besetting sins, their spiritual aspirations, their state of mind as influenced by the circumstances and current events. Then preach the truth in such measures, in such proportions, in such forms, at such times, as may seem best suited to bring men to Christ and to build them up in the Christian life.<sup>ix</sup>

We are in need of a practical theology of preaching that returns preachers once again to the mission of discipling people through their preaching. This is the kind of theology of preaching for which I have been looking—and it has changed the way I look at what I do as a preacher. When you see yourself as a discipler, you will rethink how you preach and what you preach.

### **Understanding Our Present Purpose in Light of Preaching’s Past**

In order for us to get a handle on how we can preach with a view to discipleship, we might be better informed by taking a backwards glance. Preaching can be categorized as polemical preaching, doctrinal preaching, didactic preaching, missionary preaching and catechetical preaching. Characteristics found in each of the categories are bound to influence each other.

Polemical preaching, like the sermon by Stephen before the Sanhedrin recorded in Acts 7, is a defense of the Gospel with characteristics of what would become the tone of missionary preaching of the church.<sup>x</sup> This evangelistic thrust invites disciples but doesn't necessarily build them.

Missionary preaching has characteristics of polemical preaching. Its vision is expansive, energized by evangelistic zeal. New Testament preaching was largely missionary preaching. Christ's own mission and that of the early church was understood missiologically. "It meant to proclaim that the kingdom was at hand but also implied a call to repentance and an invitation to faith."<sup>xi</sup> These sermons are directed not to the household of faith, to those in the Temple courts, or even to the synagogue. Instead, this type of sermon turns outward to the world. They contain the recounting of God's redemptive acts in history and are polemical, as displayed in the sermons of Peter, Stephen, and Paul.<sup>xii</sup>

For the purposes of discipleship, the types of sermons in which we are most interested are catechetical, doctrinal and didactic preaching. Doctrinal and didactic sermons can be classified under catechetical preaching. Catechetical preaching is directed toward those who are already converted, who have stepped over the threshold of belief and are now disciples, learners of Christ. Hughes Oliphant Old clarifies:

Catechetical preaching therefore outlines basic Christian teaching, often explaining the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the sacraments. Catechetical preaching is by its very nature systematic.... [I]t was the practice of the rabbis, long before the time of Jesus, to teach the interpretation of the Law in a systematic manner day by day in the courts of the Temple or in the synagogue school. This teaching was codified first in the Mishnah and then in the Talmud. There was nothing introductory about this systematic interpretation of the Law. In fact, it reached a high level of scholarly achievement as it was developed in the schools of Jerusalem and Babylon. Jesus and his disciples engaged in the same kind of learned discussion, as we can gather from the Sermon on the Mount. Many of the New Testament Epistles contain a considerable amount of moral catechism in their final chapters.... These passages make it clear that even the earliest Christians considered it important to teach the Christian way of life to those who had accepted the gospel.<sup>xiii</sup>

In a reading of the history of preaching one gets the impression that catechetical preaching is limited to introductory instruction to new believers. But this does not mean that the teaching is not advanced.<sup>xiv</sup> Nor, does it mean that the

teaching of the Scriptures to new believers and maturing believers is simplistic. In catechetical preaching doctrinal preaching and didactic preaching continues to lead the disciple into deeper understanding and a richer, more mature faith.

The early church placed high value on teaching through the sermon. Augustine considered catechetical preaching—teaching—to be the primary role of preaching. John Calvin urged, “Preaching is to teach Christianity; the purpose of preaching is to instruct the believer.”<sup>xv</sup>

This means that catechetical preaching, doctrinal preaching, and didactic preaching play a key role in the nurturing of disciples. “Good, difficult doctrinal preaching teaches the meaning of the atonement or the incarnation by stretching the mind, the sinews of the faith, and opening new vistas for Christian experience,” says William Carl. “Good, difficult doctrinal preaching encourages the believer to ponder in depth the great doctrines of the faith.”<sup>xvi</sup>

In addition, didactic teaching was both informational and morally instructive. Like its parent, catechetical preaching, didactic preaching reasons and informs and calls for mature practice. Jesus’ ministry was characterized by didactic preaching as is much of the New Testament.<sup>xvii</sup>

As discipling preachers, we want to shape disciples from God’s Word, introducing them to the faith and then deepening them in the faith. This is done through catechetical, doctrinal and didactic preaching.

What, then, are some reminders that would help us to engage in a preaching-as-discipleship practical theology? There are a few to consider:

### **We preach to real people**

Preachers tend to use terms like “congregation” or “listeners” or even “audience” or some other designation to speak of the people to whom they preach. But they are real people with real needs and with real faith. They are men and women on the path to maturity in Jesus Christ. Some have yet to step onto the path, while others have been on the path a long time, but they are real flesh and blood people. Grant Howard observes, “Each person is unique, with numerous identities and multiple roles.” He adds, “Unless we keep these features in mind, we will easily revert to generalized preaching to a stereotyped audience.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Sidney Greidanus states, “Since the purpose of preaching is to build up the church (1 Cor 14:3; Eph 4:11-12), preachers will naturally wish to select

preaching-texts with an [p. 124] eye to the needs of the church. Such needs can cover a wide variety of areas.”<sup>xix</sup> He continues:

Preachers may also detect in their congregations specific needs or short comings (e.g., lack of love, joy) which should be addressed and which will guide them in their text selection. Moreover, personal needs of individual members such as sorrow or unemployment, may guide preachers to texts which will address those needs. One must be careful, of course, not to diagnose needs superficially or to respond with a sermon to every perceived ‘need’; but as long as the needs are discerned communally (e.g., with the elders) and in the light of the Scriptures, they are a legitimate consideration in selecting preaching texts.<sup>xx</sup>

George Miles Gibson may be correct when he notes, “A frequent criticism of preachers is that they are more interested in ideas than in people.”<sup>xxi</sup> But he later encourages, “The preacher who knows and loves his people will have them in mind whenever he preaches and will deliberately plan some sermons directly around their personal needs.”<sup>xxii</sup>

Years ago Merrill Abbey recognized the preacher’s responsibility to understand the congregation as a whole and the particularities of individual believers. Abby writes:

He will think about individual parishioners and the peculiar circumstances that weigh upon them. He will think of groups in the church and what has been happening in their discussions and ventures in service – or their withdrawals from venturing.<sup>xxiii</sup>

We preach to real people, not just a sea of faces—or a pond of them! The thoughtful and prayerful preacher is aware of the spiritual temperature of those whom she disciples through preaching. I tell my students, “Ministry is people.” When they come to realize that ministry is not about them, or books, or their study or simply ideas, but about people, they have made the first step toward a practical theology of preaching. We preach to real people.

### **People are dependent upon you for feeding from God’s Word**

As pastor/preachers we are shepherds. We provide nourishment for those under our care. As a pastor/preacher we want to know our listeners well enough to know what they need—as a group and as individuals. As the preacher Jowett urges:

To us is entrusted the solemn duty of finding food. The sheep are largely dependent upon their shepherds for the riches or poverty of their provisions. We are to provide against starvation, or against that semi-starvation which arises from innutritious herbage, and which results in weakness, anemia, disease.

He continues: "You are to be guardians of the church's health by providing against moral and spiritual famine."<sup>xxiv</sup>

Those whom we disciple through preaching deserve more than surface comments on a text. The eighteenth century preacher John Claude knew this to be true. He advocates:

Everybody can read scripture with notes and comments to obtain simply the sense: but we cannot instruct, solve difficulties, unfold mysteries, penetrate into the ways of divine wisdom, establish truth, refute error, comfort, correct, and censure, fill the hearers with an admiration of the wonderful works and ways of God, inflame their souls with zeal, powerfully incline them to piety and holiness, which are the ends of preaching, unless you go farther than barely enabling them to understand scripture.<sup>xxv</sup>

"Whatever the local situation," says Andrew Blackwood, "a wise program for the pulpit enables the people to grow in appreciation and love of the Bible."<sup>xxvi</sup> People are dependent upon you for feeding from God's Word.

### **Remember your calling as a shepherd of God's people**

Robert J. McCracken advises, "'Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine, and to all the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.' Cultivate the shepherd heart." He adds, "Never lose the human touch."<sup>xxvii</sup> Why? "There is a close connection between pastoral and pulpit work."<sup>xxviii</sup> The connection between preaching and discipling is integral.

In the tantalizing book buzz we preachers tend to get while preparing our sermons, we may unintentionally forget the reason why we're constructing the sermon—we are shepherds of God's people. When engaging in our own spiritual disciplines we are to pray for ourselves and for those whom God has called us to disciple.

The practice of praying for my flock became real to me in my first church. The congregation had a reputation of being a troubled church. There were church bosses and factions and yet there were people who wanted to grow as disciples

of Jesus. As their shepherd they needed me to pray for them. And I needed to pray for wisdom on how to love them and lead them and disciple them. I found a church photo directory and began to pray. When I saw church folk on the street, in a local store, in their homes, or at a church function, I was spiritually prepared to talk with them about life and I was better able to speak to them through the sermon. Why? Because I was getting to know them on all kinds of levels—and my sermons showed it.

I've carried this practice over into my teaching. Each semester I pray daily through my class role. As their shepherd-teacher, I'm more able to connect with my students inside and outside of the classroom because I care about them. The place in which you serve may change—from one church to another or from the church to the classroom—but the calling remains the same. Remember your calling as a shepherd of God's people.

### **Every Congregation is Not the Same**

Churches are different. Some are more mature spiritually while others can't seem to get out of the infancy stage. Harold Bryson notes, "Wise preachers know that collective groups take on temperaments or personalities, and a church is no exception."<sup>xxix</sup> This doesn't mean that the universal truth of a given text shouldn't be preached to a particular church. But what it might mean is that the text may not be the most appropriate for that church at that time.

Pastors reading this observation that not all churches are the same probably agree. A friend of mine graduated from seminary and became the pastor of a small town church. His ministry flourished. He learned to lead, preach, teach, and love his congregation. When they were looking for a pastor they specifically stated that they wanted a fresh seminary graduate—to help him to become a pastor. They did. The next church he went to benefited from his experience.

One church I served lived in the shadow of its past. They were once a mature church. But now they played church. They were childish, almost infantile. Preaching to these disciples focused on a relearning of the faith, for that's where they were—they remembered their history but forgot their faith. The situation shaped my preaching.

In another town I preached to a different congregation. As a whole, the people were more of a mature middle-age adult in their walk. We were able to deal with more challenging issues of the faith, although any congregation is in need of cultivating their appreciation "for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). A wise preacher will remember every congregation is not the same.

## Choose Texts Wisely

Sidney Greidanus urges caution when we select texts on which to preach, especially when we're sensitive to the spiritual condition of our listeners. He warns:

The requirement that preaching-texts be selected with the needs of the church in mind discloses that text selection is not a rather formal procedure *prior* to preaching but that it is part of the very application of the sermon. The danger, of course, is that the needs of the congregation may distort subsequent interpretation of the chosen text. But the danger of misinterpretation is even greater when a text has been chosen apart from the needs of the congregation and must belatedly serve the function of meeting those needs. Therefore, preaching-texts ought to be chosen with an eye to the needs of the congregation; once chosen, however, the texts must be allowed to speak for themselves lest present needs distort the actual meaning of the texts.<sup>xxx</sup>

Having a preaching plan does not necessarily mean that one is aiming at discipleship. Marshall Shelley states, "But the danger of the system is that pastors may assume that balanced coverage of Scripture equals balanced preaching."<sup>xxxi</sup> Bryan Chapell warns:

[P]reachers who choose texts to address their personal concerns need to be cautioned in at least two ways. First, make sure you do not impose your concern on the text. Solid exposition should demonstrate that the passage really speaks to the issue you want to address and that your passion to address a particular subject has not abused the original author's intent. Second, be aware that a ministry that only addresses a preacher's personal concerns can be come too limited in perspective for the needs of the congregation. The pastor may end up riding hobby horses or unconsciously concentrating on personal struggles, thereby neglecting other important truths needed for a fully informed and mature congregation.<sup>xxxii</sup>

We may be tempted to speak to our concerns, our agenda, and not the spiritual needs of those whom we're discipling. "Heaven forgive the man who treats his congregation to a dissertation on 'The Temple' when the village has just lost a

fishing boat or the local factory has been closed and the workforce put on the dole!” notes Edmund Jones.<sup>xxxiii</sup> When it comes to preaching and discipleship, we are to choose our texts wisely.

### **Prepare Well**

This article is about preaching and discipleship and how one’s planning is influenced by the notion that through our preaching we are contributing to the discipleship of believers. What that means is we cannot tolerate last-minute preparation, a Saturday night special that does not take into consideration the immense responsibility it is to “shepherd the flock under our care.” We don’t want to settle for microwave snacks but be diligent in preparing a healthy banquet for growing disciples. As Walter Russell Bowie advises:

Real sermons, which will feed people’s minds and hearts, cannot be produced on the spur of the moment any more than ripe grain can be gathered from empty ground. There must have been preparation of the earth, sowing of the seed, patient cultivation, and then a justified trust in the long, silent processes of vital growth before the harvest can be reaped.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Discipleship-minded preachers prepare well in the task of preaching.

### **Conclusion**

What does a practical theology of preaching look like? Preaching is part of the church’s on-going faith development of believers, disciples. Preaching must not be as much concerned about – form, structure, philosophies or even theologies – but have as its presupposition that it is shaping learners on their way to maturity in Christ. A practical theology of preaching understands that preaching is part of what it means to disciple men and women to maturity in Christ.

## Notes

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- <sup>i</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, IV NP-NF First Series, 2:574-597.
- <sup>ii</sup> Joseph M. Stowell, III, "Preaching for a Change," *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, ed. Scott M. Gibson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 128-131.
- <sup>iii</sup> Stuart Briscoe, "Planning a Preaching Menu," *Mastering Contemporary Preaching*, Bill Hybels, Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon Robinson (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1989), 45-46.
- <sup>iv</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students: A Selection of Addresses Delivered to the Students of The Pastor's College, Metropolitan Tabernacle* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1887), 92.
- <sup>v</sup> Lori Carrell, *The Great American Sermon Survey* (Wheaton: Mainstay Church Resources, 2000), 29.
- <sup>vi</sup> Carrell, 29.
- <sup>vii</sup> Carrell, 29.
- <sup>viii</sup> Carrell, 30.
- <sup>ix</sup> John A. Kern, *The Ministry to the Congregation* (New York: Wilbur B. Ketcham, 1897), 404.
- <sup>x</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: The Biblical Period*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 173. See also, Scott M. Gibson, "Missionary Preaching,"
- <sup>xi</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: The Biblical Period*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 123.
- <sup>xii</sup> Old, 1:173-174. See Acts 2:14-41; Acts 3:12-26; Acts 7:1-53; Acts 17:22-32.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Old, 1:13.
- <sup>xiv</sup> See Old 1:245.
- <sup>xv</sup> William J. Carl, III, *Preaching Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 60.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Carl, 60-61.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Old 1:126-127; 236-238.
- <sup>xviii</sup> J. Grant Howard, *Creativity in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 50.
- <sup>xix</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 124-125.
- <sup>xx</sup> Greidanus, 125.
- <sup>xxi</sup> George Miles Gibson, *Planned Preaching* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 71.
- <sup>xxii</sup> George Miles Gibson, 74.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Merrill R. Abbey, *Living Doctrine in a Vital Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1964), 43.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> J.H. Jowett, *The Preacher: His Life and Work* (Garden City and New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1929), 76-77.
- <sup>xxv</sup> John Claude, *An Essay on the Composition of a Sermon*, Trans., Robert Robinson vol. 1, 3rd ed. (London: T. Scollick, 1788), 5.

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- xxvi Andrew W. Blackwood, *Planning a Year's Pulpit Work* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1952), 212.
- xxvii Robert J. McCracken, *The Making of the Sermon* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 19.
- xxviii McCracken, 19.
- xxix Harold T. Bryson, *Expository Preaching: The Art of Preaching Through a Book of the Bible* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 78.
- xxx Greidanus, 125.
- xxxi Marshall Shelley, "Three Ways to Plan Your Preaching," *Leadership* 4:2 (Spring 1983): 32.
- xxxii Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 55.
- xxxiii Edmund Jones, "The Pastor's Problems: V. Preparing the Weekly Sermon," *The Expository Times* 92 (May 1981): 228-229.
- xxxiv Walter Russell Bowie, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1954), 63.