

Deep Preaching: Creating significant sermons within community

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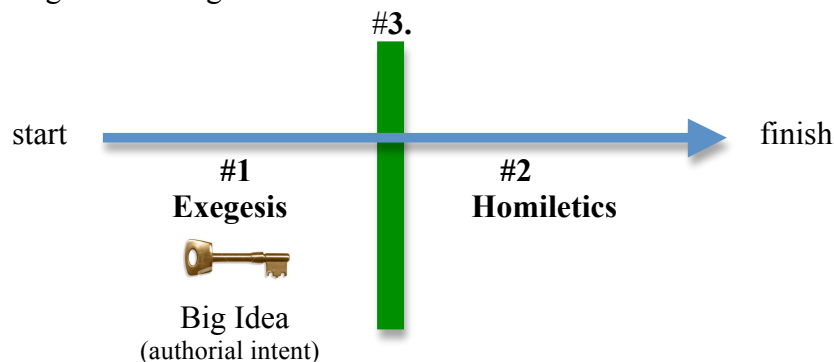
Abstract: This paper presents a methodology for creating exegetically sound and spiritually significant sermons. It asserts that in order to preach 'deep' sermons, preachers must go beyond exegetical data. Deep preachers will encourage the involvement of the Holy Spirit during the sermon preparation process by leveraging the classic spiritual disciplines of meditation, prayer and fasting. The paper will provide concrete suggestions regarding how and when preachers should employ these classic spiritual disciplines and how this can be enhanced within community.

My interest in Deep Preaching arose out of a terrible classroom experience. I was standing at the back of the classroom, ensconced in a sound-proof booth, listening on headphones as one of my students preached a sermon in one of my 'Introduction to Preaching' courses.

As I listened to the message I heard the student follow the 'steps to preparing a sermon' that I had outlined earlier in the semester. During these classes I had outlined that the homiletical process has two stages.¹ The first stage is exegesis (#1), and the second stage is homiletics (#2.) Their goal in the exegetical stage, I had explained, was to conduct an exegetical analysis of the biblical text to determine authorial intent. When they could express the intent in a concise subject and complement form (Big Idea), their work in stage #1 was completed.

The second stage (#2) was the homiletical stage. While the first stage focused on understanding the meaning of the biblical text, the second stage concentrated upon communicating that idea to a contemporary audience. Tasks such as outlining, illustrating, introducing and concluding the sermon were considered in the second stage.

I had also made clear in class that they were to imagine an impenetrable wall (#3) separating these two stages. Exegesis and homiletics needed to remain separate if the integrity of each was to be maintained. To ensure that exegesis was not bent in the service of homiletics and vice versa, the big idea was to be considered the 'key' to unlock the door in the wall and allow them to move from stage one to stage two.



On one level the sermon was impressive. This was a technically sound message. It was based on a legitimate natural unit of Scripture, had a clear ‘big idea’ that arose legitimately from that unit of Scripture and was reflected in a clear homiletical outline. What is more, my student was delivering the sermon with a level of polish seldom seen in a beginning student. The realization that the student had done everything I had asked and, according to my syllabus deserved the highest grade possible, made me want to weep. Why?

Because that sermon, despite being well organized and sporting only the soundest of exegesis, was trivial. Superficial. Emotionally vacuous. My student was handling one of the most profound truths in Scripture with the respect typically accorded to a trash container on its way to the curb. What my student was preaching was true, but banal. He had gazed at the truth of Scripture without being overwhelmed by it. He had held the truth in his hands but, unlike Jeremiah, he had not eaten it. He knew God’s word externally not internally. The sermon was shallow.

This student’s sermon began my quest to understand how to create deep sermons. What follows is some of what I have learned along the way.

Learning from the Holy Spirit

It is clear to me that the deep respect that we conservative evangelicals have for the inerrant and infallible biblical text, can lead us to neglect the Holy Spirit’s role as teacher. We are quick to listen to human commentators, but are reluctant to hear what the Holy Spirit has to say. And those of us who teach homiletics are not doing much to reverse this emphasis.

This de-emphasis on the teaching or illuminating role of the Holy Spirit stands in stark contrast to Scripture. Jesus knew that we needed more than a shelf of commentaries and Logos software to properly understand Scripture. This is why he promised his disciples in John 14 that

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.²

What will the Spirit of Truth do? One of his primary ministries is to reveal the truth of his word. He teaches. The Holy Spirit gives a depth of understanding into the word of God that cannot be achieved by raw human intellect or Pentium computer processing alone.

“I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.³

Jesus realized that, as consistently and as effectively as he taught his followers the Scriptures, much more instruction would be required after his ascension. This is why Jesus told the disciples that the Holy Spirit would pick up where he left off. As Jesus “opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures”⁴ on the road to Emmaus, so the Holy Spirit will help us cognitively to extend beyond the capacity of our human exegetical skills.

Computer programs and well-educated pagans are capable of *understanding* the rudimentary elements of a biblical text. They can decline nouns and parse verbs just fine. But it takes the supernatural enabling of the Holy Spirit to *fully comprehend* what God is communicating in holy writ.

As John Calvin pointed out in his Institutes,

The testimony of the Spirit is superior to reason. For as God alone can properly bear witness to his own words, so these words will not obtain full credit in the hearts of men, until they are sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.... For though [Scripture] in its own majesty has enough to command reverence, nevertheless, it then begins truly to touch us when it is sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.⁵

I agree with Millard J. Erickson that the Holy Spirit assists the believer to comprehend the meaning of the biblical text. Insufficient understanding of God’s truth is a consequence of sin. Sin inhibits our ability to fully interpret Scripture. Sin clouds our vision and injects unconscious presuppositions that bias our understanding of Scripture. Only the Spirit can overcome these noetic effects of sin.⁶ The Holy Spirit is a necessary component of the biblical interpretive process.

The Apostle Paul certainly realized the importance of the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. As undeniably brilliant as he was, Paul knew that even his unaided intellect was insufficient to fully understand what God had revealed in the Bible. Nobody is smart enough to fully understand Scripture alone. This is why Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians that,

“The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”⁷

Spiritual insight is required to fully understand the word of God. And we do not have this apart from the work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul knew that in addition to our natural faculties, we need the supernatural faculties of the Holy Spirit to help us with our exegesis. This is why he wrote:

...we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they

would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written:

“No eye has seen,
no ear has heard,
no mind has conceived
what God has prepared for those who love him”—
but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.⁸

Paul understood the limitations of human-powered exegesis. He had specialized in it before his dramatic confrontation with the risen Christ. He remembered what it was like to study the Scriptures without the assistance of the Holy Spirit. And he wants none of it. The results of human exegesis practiced by the Pharisees were not pretty, and did not lead to godliness. The fruit of their work in the text was soul-deadening. Exegesis that is done without the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit results in the interpreter manipulating the word rather than allowing God to shape the life of the interpreter. It ultimately leads people away from God rather than towards him.

It is clear that as he wrote to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul had come to practice a different form of exegesis. Now Paul allows the Spirit to be his teacher. Now he allows the Spirit to instruct him in the Scriptures. It is because of the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit in his intellect Paul can say in 1 Corinthians 2:16, "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ."

Paul also makes it clear that the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit is to be enjoyed by more than just the apostles. This is obvious when Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus that

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.⁹

Paul prayed that the Holy Spirit would teach the lay people of this church. The letter he was writing was intended to give them important theological information from which they could gain a level of understanding based on their past training. But Paul knew that they needed more than human ability. This is why he was praying that the Holy Spirit would teach them. He knew that they needed the Spirit of wisdom in order to know God better. In order to know God deeply.

People aided by the Holy Spirit think differently when they study the Bible. They understand the Scriptures in ways that laptop computers and secular linguistic scholars will never know. They are led into a fuller comprehension of the biblical text by the author of Scripture.

The Holy Spirit helps us comprehend what the Bible means

The fact that the Holy Spirit is your teacher does not mean you can skip the hard exegetical work in the text that is necessary to determine the authorial intent of the text you will preach. All sermons must be grounded in Scripture. If they aren't, they aren't biblical sermons.

All sermon preparation must begin with a thorough grammatical historical analysis of a natural unit of Scripture in order to determine the main idea that the original human author and the Holy Spirit placed there. The Holy Spirit extends your mental faculties, he does not replace them.

The Holy Spirit will not teach you what the original author did not intend to communicate to his original audience. To be truly biblical, all exegesis must have as its goal the objective truth that is contained in the biblical text. Haddon Robinson is correct when he says "a text cannot mean what it never meant."

If Moses were listening to a sermon you were preaching from the book of Exodus, he should not be surprised by your exegesis. If Moses is startled by what you say then you are not preaching a biblical sermon. The Holy Spirit will not guide you to an interpretation that he did not intend. Intimacy with and reliance upon the Holy Spirit will not eliminate the hard exegetical work in the text. Far from it.

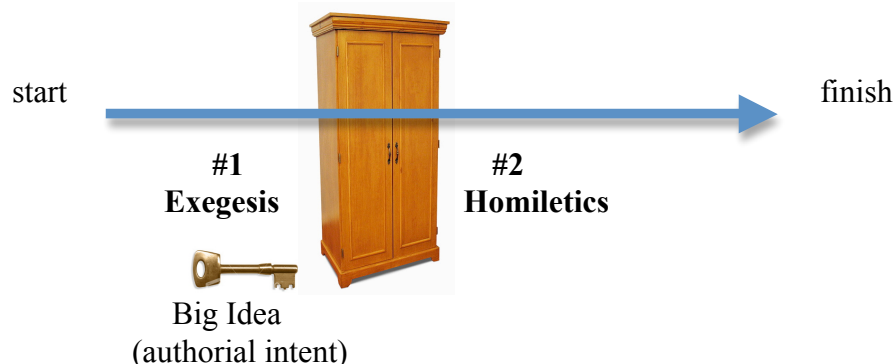
But exegetical work alone is inadequate. It is only the first step in the interpretive process. And, as challenging as this first step may be, it is often the easiest step. Deep preaching requires that you have Holy Spirit assisted insight into the Scriptures you preach. Deep preaching requires more. Much more.

Deep Preaching Homiletic

My attempt to seriously integrate the Holy Spirit's role as teacher into the homiletics process is diagrammed below. At first glance it looks similar to the model I introduced earlier. You will note that the primacy of Scripture is maintained. It does not jettison Scripture in favor of some Gnostic-ish divine knowledge that arrives directly and privately communicated from God to the preacher. It takes J.I Packer's warning of the "insufficiency" of either the Spirit without the Word or the Word without the Spirit very seriously.¹⁰ The 'Deep Preaching' model outlined below recognizes the importance of both Scripture and Spirit.

This model also retains the integrity of both the exegetical and homiletical tasks by keeping them separate. The exegetical task remains the first task of the preacher. There is no sidestepping of the grammatical historical interpretation of the biblical text in favor of a 'mystical' meaning. The goal of the exegetical process remains the identification of the big idea of the biblical text, and requires rigorous work in the original languages and culture. This big idea must be the same idea

that the original author intended to communicate to his original audience. Any big idea that cannot be sustained by rigorous application of the grammatical historical examination of the text should not be preached. We must not say in God's name what God did not say.



The obvious change in the model is that the wall has been replaced with a closet. Why a closet? This metaphor is borrowed from Jesus comments to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus, in his comments on spiritual disciplines, tells his disciples that when they pray they are not to be like the hypocrites . . . but “when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.”¹¹

Deep preaching requires that the preacher take the idea of the biblical text into a place of solitude, and intentionally invite the Holy Spirit to participate. The closet is where the preacher shuts the commentaries and listens to God through the use of the classic spiritual disciplines. Here we take the big idea intended by the original author and spend time with it in meditation, prayer and, when necessary, fasting.

The closet is where the Holy Spirit helps us move beyond our elementary *understanding* of a biblical text into a fuller *comprehension* than we could ever accomplish with unaided human energy and ability. What does the Holy Spirit do with us in the closet?

- ‘Closet Work’ helps us move beyond the grainy black and white picture of a TV circa 1950 to the breathtaking clarity of a digital high-definition image on a studio quality plasma screen. We see what God is saying in the biblical text with far more clarity than ever before.
- ‘Closet Work’ allows the Holy Spirit to do for us what an audio headset does for a visitor to a museum. The museum visitors who take advantage of the audio headsets will see the same exhibits as everyone else, but their comprehension of those exhibits will be far better. Because the visitors with the headsets have the added benefit of having the curator of the museum whisper into their ear about the displays they are looking at. Only those who use the headsets will fully appreciate the displays they are looking at. Those who decide to do it on their own will gaze admiringly but uncomprehendingly at the wonders that surround them.

It is during Closet Work that the Holy Spirit whispers in our ears about the wonders of Scripture that surround us. Closet Work gives us a fuller understanding of what we see in the biblical text.

- With our own exegetical resources we stare at the Bible like tourists in downtown Denver looking at the Rocky Mountains. By ourselves all we can see is that there are mountains in the west. But during Closet Work, the Holy Spirit picks us up like a helicopter and takes us to downtown Vail.

The Holy Spirit will never take us to different mountains than what we saw in the Bible. But the Spirit will help us see those mountains with a clarity that we could never have experienced on our own. With the Holy Spirit's help we can fully comprehend what we saw at a distance.

During our Closet Work the Spirit takes us by the hand and gives us a guided tour through his creation. We stroll hand in hand with him through the high meadows, smell the flowers, feel the warmth of the sun, splash in a stream, and taste the ice of a glacier.

As we leave the closet we will say. "On my own I knew that there were Rocky Mountains out there. But I now fully understand these mountains. The abstract has become real. What was distant has become personal. I am comfortable living here."

Any well-educated pagan can *understand* the grammar of a passage of Scripture. But we need the Holy Spirit in order to *comprehend* what a text means.

A.W. Tozer understood the role that the Holy Spirit plays in helping us fully understand a passage of Scripture. Tozer spoke strongly against the intellectual arrogance of human textualism. Tozer understood textualism as

The belief that the human mind is the supreme authority in the judgment of truth . . . it is *confidence in the ability of the human mind to do that which the Bible declares it was never created to do and consequently is incapable of doing* . . .

The inward kernel of truth has the same configuration as the outward shell. The mind can grasp the shell but only the Spirit of God can lay hold of the internal essence. Our great error has been that we have trusted to the shell and have believed we were sound in faith because we were able to explain the external shape of truth as found in the letter of the Word.

From this mortal error fundamentalism is dying.¹²

I'm suggesting that we heed Tozer's warning. That we deliberately utilize the Holy Spirit in our preaching by taking the idea of the biblical text into a place of solitude. Into your spiritual closet, where, alone with God, you use the classic spiritual disciplines of meditation, prayer and fasting to invite the Holy Spirit to speak. This is what I call homiletical 'Closet Work.' And it is a deliberate break from the modernistic mindset of the past.

The Holy Spirit takes us Deep

The secret of Deep Preaching is the Holy Spirit. The illuminating work of the Holy Spirit certainly made a significant difference in Paul's preaching.

The Spirit deepened Paul's preaching in two different ways. First, he enabled Paul to see deeply into the *content* of the Scripture he was preaching. This is why Paul could comment on his own preaching in 1 Corinthians 2:13-14, "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words." Paul's sermons were not strung together clichés sung to familiar tunes. Like Jesus teaching, Paul's sermonic material was fresh and authoritative, because God taught him the truths directly.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit also directly influenced the *response* of those who heard Paul's messages. Positively or negatively, few people walked away bored from the Apostle Paul's preaching. The Holy Spirit so worked within the truth of Paul's sermons that people were forced to either completely accept or dramatically reject what they heard. And Paul knew this. He said to those he preached to in Thessalonica that, "our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction."¹³

The unusual power of Paul's sermons stemmed from their unusual source. Unlike most of the preachers of his day, Paul preached what the Holy Spirit taught him from the word of God and watched God use His words to transform lives. Paul says in Colossians 1:28 that "we proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone *with all wisdom*, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ." Paul preached with the confidence of a person who knows that what they were saying came straight from the mind of Christ.

What is surprising, however, is that the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit is not restricted to Apostles. We can all enjoy the mind of Christ in our sermon preparation process. In fact Paul wants every believer, ordained and lay, to enjoy the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. This is especially clear in his letter to the Colossians. He wants these believers to know that

"Since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all *spiritual wisdom and understanding*.¹⁴"

And he exhorts these dear people to

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all *wisdom*, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.¹⁵"

The illuminating work of the Holy Spirit is available to all believers. Even preachers.

The Apostolic Secret to Deep Preaching

There is no secret to the powerful preaching that the Apostles demonstrated in the early chapters of Acts. The apostles publically announce the modus operandi behind their preaching in Acts 6:2-4.

“It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and *will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.*”¹⁶

The key to the Apostles consistently deep and effective preaching is stated in Acts 6:4. Here the Apostles plainly declare the ministry priorities that will preserve their powerful preaching. They will eliminate all worthy but distracting tasks in order to free up their schedules for what is most important. They want to give their constant attention¹⁷ to two primary tasks. Their first task is prayer. The second is the word of God.

The meaning of “prayer” in verse four is plain, but take careful note of the phrase translated in the NIV “the ministry of the word.” The Greek word behind this English phrase is **λόγος** (logos).’ It literally means ‘word.’ What are the Apostles, and Luke who recorded their words, saying here? What exactly is this ministry of the word that the Apostles were continually engaged in?

Since the word **λόγος** is used elsewhere in the book of Acts to refer to the act of preaching,¹⁸ it can, very legitimately, be understood here as a reference to preaching. But **λόγος** it is not a word that is commonly used in Acts to refer to preaching. In fact, when Luke wants to talk specifically about preaching, he usually chooses a word more commonly used to refer to this task.¹⁹

So why would he use a relatively rare word to talk about preaching here? *Especially* when the reader realizes that the word **λόγος** is much more commonly used within the book of Acts to refer to Scripture.²⁰

What is going on in Acts 6:2-4? Are the Apostles continually devoting themselves to prayer and Scripture? Or to prayer and preaching? The answer is ‘yes.’

I think that the word **λόγος** was specifically selected for use in Acts 6:4 because it was broad enough to embrace the priority that the Apostles placed in spending time in the Scriptures and the priority that they gave to proclaiming the Scriptures. The word **λόγος** is broad enough to include both Scripture meditation *and* preaching.

While the Apostles first priority was to be in continual prayer, their second priority was to be people who spent their lives immersed in the word - continually living within the Scriptures – saturating themselves with it – meditating on it - and then preaching out of this abundance.

When Luke tells us in Acts 6:4 is that the apostles were spending their time unceasingly (προσκαρτερέω) in the word (logos,) Luke is meshing the discipline of meditation with the task of preaching. The secret of the Apostles powerful preaching lay in their utilization of the classic spiritual disciplines of prayer and meditation.

The Apostles did not come to the Scriptures as sermonizing ‘professionals’ on Friday afternoons trying to pluck a sermon from the pages of Scripture. They were not eagles swooping down out of their natural element trying to get food for their brood by snagging a fish while trying not to get wet. Far from it. Their natural element was the Word of God. They lived in it.

The apostles insisted that the church allow them to devote their days to thinking and praying their way through Scripture. As they did, they combined the irresistible power of the Word of God with the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, and the result was preaching. This potent combination led to extraordinary preaching. It resulted in Deep Preaching.

It is helpful to note, however, that the truth of Acts 6:2-4 is not orphaned in that text. In fact, *all* of the Apostles employed the homiletical strategy contained in that passage. Even Paul, whose later conversion precluded him from the events of Acts 6:4 utilized its ‘secret’ of homiletical success. In Acts 18:5 we read “When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.” Once again Luke gives us insight into the apostolic homiletical process.

The phrase translated in Acts 18:5 as “devoted himself exclusively” comes from a single Greek word συνέχω (sunecho) which means to be seized by something. In Luke 22:63 συνέχω is used to describe how Jesus was under constant guard while being blindfolded, mocked and struck after his Gethsemane arrest. συνέχω is used to communicate to the reader that the attention of his captors was intensive and uninterrupted. In the context of Acts 18:5 the word means that “Paul is *dominated / occupied* — by his task as proclaimer of the word.”²¹

In fact, this word συνέχω (sunecho) is repeated twice in the same verse. Not only was Paul devoted, but he was devoted, devoted! The repetition of this word underscores the single-minded focus that Paul had. What was Paul so obsessed about? Once again the apostolic preoccupation was λόγος (word.) Since the inspired writer chooses to use the same ambiguous word he used in Acts 6:4, we are drawn to the same conclusion. One of the reasons why the apostles were able to consistently preach such deep and powerful sermons was because of the devotion they gave to the word of God. They studied and meditated on the word. And they preached the word.

The reason that all of the Apostles were able to preach such consistently deep and effective sermons was because they lived immersed in prayer and the word of God. They mixed these complimentary spiritual disciplines, and sermons erupted from their souls as a consequence.

In this they were following the example of their savior. In Luke 4 Jesus refused to be diverted into a ministry of healing. Despite the pressing needs and demands of the crowds, Jesus established the parameters of his ministry. “I must preach . . . because that is why I was sent.’ And he kept on preaching.”²² I think that Jesus turned away from the legitimate physical needs of the crowds because – like the disciples – he knew that the disciplines of meditation and prayer were so demanding that it was impossible to focus on both. The call to preach is a call to study. And then to meditate and pray on the truth of Scripture one is looking at in study. For the preacher, prayer is a divine dialogue that flows out of exegesis. The discussion starts with meditation as we chew on the truth of Scripture. We meditate by muttering questions of the biblical text as we go through our day. And as we wonder, for example, what it means to our life our ministry context and the larger community. It is natural for us to ask the Holy Spirit what he thinks. As we meditate we enter into a seamless conversation between ourselves and the Holy Spirit. In the quietness of our closet, prayer and meditation are welded together. They are fused by the intensity of our yearning to comprehend the passage we will be preaching.

Meditation and prayer are to be more like twin sisters than distant cousins. The scriptures call us to meditate ‘day and night.’ They also insist that we ‘pray without ceasing.’ How can we fill our days with both of these activities? By doing them simultaneously.

As the truth of Scripture sets the tempo, we are to sway between these disciplines like a dancer. During this spiritual dance we cling to the Holy Spirit like a bridegroom holding his bride during their wedding dance. We hold the Spirit tight to our chest, moving slowly across the dance floor, rhythmically shifting our weight from meditation to prayer and back again, patiently waiting for the Spirit to lean forward and whisper truth into our ear.

During this dance we edge away from the science of exegesis towards the mind of Christ. Here we seek spiritual wisdom rather than manuscript analysis. Here we weave the deep insights that will make up the fabric of our sermon. And we do so by working the loom of the spiritual disciplines back and forth between meditation and prayer. We live in the atmosphere of prayer by moving naturally and effortlessly from meditation to prayer and back again.

Tried and true

I am not advocating an unprecedented homiletical methodology that will lead you into dangerous and uncharted territory. Closet work enjoys a long and storied tradition. The Puritans advocated the union of meditation and prayer.

When you read Scriptures, think how God is speaking to me, and thereby furnishing me with matter to speak to him in Prayer; this passage suits my case, I will improve it in Confession, Petition, . or Thanksgiving ... , and thus you will arrive to an habit of free-conversing with God;. Reading [Scripture] and Praying are near kin: the one is an help to the other: Be much employed in both.²³

Unfortunately, the ‘habit of free-conversing with God’ has largely been lost among preachers today. Most of us are content with a brief prayer before we start preparing a sermon - “God help me!” - and when we are finished - “Please bless this mess!” – but not much more this. The way we pray has a direct impact on the way we preach.

If we want to preach with the impact that Martyn Lloyd-Jones had, we would be wise to heed the advice he gave regarding the preachers prayer life.

Above all--and this I regard as most important of all--always respond to every impulse to pray. The impulse to pray may come when you are reading or when you are battling with a text. I would make an absolute law of this--always obey such an impulse. Where does it come from? It is the work of the Holy Spirit; it is a part of the meaning of, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do his good pleasure" (Phil 2:12-13).²⁴

Charles Spurgeon gave similar advice to the aspiring preachers of his day.

Your prayers will be our ablest assistants while your discourses are yet upon the anvil. While other men, like Esau, are hunting for their portion, you, by the aid of prayer, will find the savory meat near at home, and may say in truth what Jacob said so falsely, “The Lord brought it to me.” If you can dip your pens into your hearts, appealing in earnestness to the Lord, you will write well; and if you can gather your matter on your knees at the gate of heaven, you will not fail to speak well. Prayer, as a mental exercise, will bring many subjects before the mind, and so help in the selection of a topic, while as a high spiritual engagement it will cleanse your inner eye that you may see truth in the light of God. Texts will often refuse to reveal their treasures till you open them with the key of prayer.²⁵

Sermons that have the strength to touch the deepest recesses of the human heart are forged in a furnace stoked with meditation and prayer. They arise out of what Eugene Peterson calls ‘contemplative exegesis’ and explains why, as a preacher, Peterson came to see that “prayer [is] at the very heart of the vocation I had entered.”²⁶

The reason why there are so many shallow sermons is because so many sermons are written like term papers. When we spend our sermon preparation time scraping truths out of books we end up preaching an unpalatable mess of information. Sermons are not academic essays. They are love notes that God pens and asks us to share with his bride. They cannot be preached until we have heard from God himself.

Why do our sermons lack the depth we long for? James answers this age-old preacher question when he says “you have not because you ask not.”²⁷ Significant sermons grow out of the soil of significant meditation and prayer.

God does not answer questions about his book to those who do not ask. Nor does he assist those who decide to preach in their own power. When preachers do not take prayerful meditation seriously their ministry from the pulpit is seriously diminished. And so are those who sit under their ministry.

Focusing your Closet Work

Knowing the importance of meditation prayer and fasting is not the same as knowing what to do with them. What should we pray and mediate about?

I suggest that you consider the idea of your biblical passage from five different perspectives, by asking five different questions. Each question will challenge you in a different way. Each question will take you deeper into the biblical passage and the idea it contains.

Please keep in mind that as you work through these questions you are *not* writing your sermon. These five questions are intended to give your time with God focus and purpose. The homiletics should not begin until your Closet Work is complete.

- Look Backward -

Ask: what did God *communicate* in this text? Why was this exegetical idea *necessary* for its original recipients?

Every passage is part of a larger story. Your goal is to determine the story into which this idea needed to be spoken.

- a. To whom did the biblical author deliver this message?
- b. What problem did it address?
- c. Why did they *need* to hear it? How urgent was it? Why?

Your goal here is to determine what the problem ‘looked like’ in the lives of the original recipients. Visualize the situation that required this biblical truth. See it in your mind. Be sure that the problem you see is tangible. If it is not real in your mind, ask why. What additional information do you need to make it concrete? Is it exegetical? Is it cultural? Go find what you need.

- d. Does the antecedent history of the recipients help explain why this instruction was necessary for these people at this time?

- e. Are there any cultural factors that would have incubated or accelerated the need for this instruction? Why were the hearts of the original recipients so prone to wander in this direction? Why did God think that *they* specifically needed to be given this idea?
- f. What do you think the emotional response of the original recipients of this biblical truth would have been? What was their visceral reaction when they first heard it? Why do you think so?
- g. What did the original recipients of this message do with it? Did they heed this word or ignore it? Do we know?
- h. How *did* this truth transform, or how *could* have it transformed the recipients life.

Haddon W. Robinson has said that: “something is not true because it is in the bible; it is in the bible because it is true.” In other words, the truth of Scripture is true to life. And our decision to obey or disobey it determines if our lives flourish or flounder. With this in mind, develop two scenarios.

- What would life have been like for the original recipients if they *had* fully responded to the truth of this passage?
 - What would life have been like for the original recipients if they had ignored or disregarded this truth?
- i. Is this the only time that this principle is mentioned in Scripture? Have others struggled with this issue throughout biblical history? Who? When? Why? With what outcome?
 - j. What metaphors best capture the meaning of this passage?

- Look Upward –

Ask: What is God saying about *Himself* in this text?

God’s commands come out of the essence of who he is; they issue out of his moral character.

- a. What does this text reveal about God’s character? Which of God’s attributes does this idea emanate from?
- b. Why is the truth of this text necessary? Why would God ask this of his people? Is God being unreasonable? Does he have your best interests at heart? How do you know that?

- c. It is very important that you are honest here. Don't succumb to the temptation to use cliché's. Don't let yourself use 'god talk.' You must be but honest with God here. There is nothing you can say that will shock or surprise God. He knows what you are and have been thinking. And you are not the only person who has thought such thoughts. Don't worry about theological orthodoxy. Sin and the temptation to sin does not come from theological orthodoxy. You will not be able to combat or correct your sinful behavior until you understand its theological core.
- d. Spend time in God's presence here. Cry out to Him for insight. Ask him to reveal himself to you more fully. Ask him to sweep away all of your lesser ideas of who he is. Your goal here is to see God as he truly is . . . not necessarily as he has been portrayed in church and in the lives and words of fellow Christians. God is holy. He stands apart and separate from everyone and every institution.

- Look Inward -

Ask: What is God saying to *me* in this text?

- Calvin's double knowledge – it is only by knowing God
that we can begin to know ourselves

In what ways am I similar / does my life parallel the original recipients of this book?

- a. Are my weaknesses' their weaknesses?
- b. Are my temptations theirs? Have I succumbed as they did?
- c. Has my life been warped as a result?
- d. In what ways? With what consequences?
- e. When was I more likely to fall into this sin?
- f. What habits / practices exist in my life that contribute to this problem?
- g. What is it about me that made me vulnerable to this particular attack by the enemy? (i.e. what is the root problem that manifests itself in this sin.)
- h. How has my life and ministry suffered as a result of this sin?
- i. How have others been affected by this?
- j. How could my life and ministry have been enhanced by withstanding this temptation?
- k. How will the idea of this text force your life spiritually forward?
- l. Picture the different reality that you and your people could be experiencing right now, if you had made different choices.

Walk in this for a time. Allow these questions to penetrate into your soul. Practice the presence of Christ. Allow the Holy Spirit to illuminate your mind with the knowledge of who you really are. The key question you need to ask yourself is *"What is stopping me from radically applying this truth to my life?"* Why do I refuse to act on it, as I know I should? Why

does it have such a hold on my life?

Seek out those who know you best and ask them to show you who you are in light of this text.

Spend time crying out to God in confession and repentance. Ask God for the insight to spot the enemy's strategies in this area. Then beg him for the strength to withstand his attacks.

- Look Outward -

Ask: What does God want to *accomplish* in this text?

- a. In what ways are the people you lead similar to the original audience? Consider the similarities that may exist. Consider factors such as
 - Socio-economically – poor or affluent?
 - Socially – comfortable family units or widows/orphans?
 - Morally – living surrounded by licentiousness? Affluence? Hedonism? Secularism?
 - Politically – is your country being led by a someone trying to follow God's direction or by a pagan?
 - Spiritually - length of time they have walked with God, the spiritual heritage they may enjoy, the temperature of their spiritual passion (i.e. cool, lukewarm or boiling hot?)
- b. Do you think that your people *want* to live in harmony with the teaching of this text? Why or why not? If they are honest, what would their objections be? [*I recommend that you get a group of people from your congregation and ask them this. Get 'feedback in advance' on this.*]
- c. What is keeping you and your people from living out this text? Are there structural / organizational barriers?
- d. What people in your congregation have lived in obedience to this text? (think of specific people)
- e. What people in your congregation have lived in violation of this text? (again, think of specific people)
- f. How could this truth transform your people and/or the community that you and your people live and minister? What are the ripple effects that could result from embracing the truth of this text?

- Look Forward -

Ask: What could *negate* the progress that I have just made through this text?

- a. What circumstances could make continued obedience to this truth difficult? (e.g. sudden singleness (divorce/death), financial pressures (economic recession / job loss))
- b. What will be the future benefits (individually and corporately) of lived in conformity to this Scripture?

Embrace community

Why do we consider preaching a competition sport? Doesn't it seem strange that so little genuine community exists among preachers? Especially when we have so much in common?

I have spent my entire pastoral ministry as part of a denomination, but it was only during some of the very early days that I felt emotionally and spiritually connected to other denominational pastors. Everyone seems absorbed in their own churches and careers. Pastors view other pastors as a pride male lion on the savannah would view a younger bachelor lion. As threats trying to take away their pride.

Deep preachers refuse to view other preachers as rivals. They know who they are before God and have no ego to protect; all they want is for God to be glorified. Deep preachers genuinely resonate with John the Baptist that 'it is O.K. if my ministry decreases, as long as Jesus' ministry increases.' They view other preachers as fellow laborers in the kingdom, and understand that our joint goal is to bring in the harvest for the God we jointly serve. And they are willing to hold the ladder while their colleague picks the fruit.

So why do our sermon preparation alone? Why not try and find other deep preachers in your area and get together with on a regular basis? This could be like one of John Wesley's 'Holy Clubs' as you combine a vigorous time of sermon discussion with relentlessly vigorous application of the God's word to your own lives.

If you are interested in starting a contemporary 'holy club,' I recommend that you establish that the primary purpose of these groups is to do spiritual life together. The secondary purpose of these groups should be sermon assistance. In order to preserve intimacy and allow everyone to participate, I would restrict the size of a group to about half dozen people

Since this group will be working through the five questions of Closet Work, you will be practicing the spiritual disciplines together and holding each other accountable for holy living as you work through biblical passages. Membership in this group will, therefore, require absolute

transparency, honesty and confidentiality. Those who won't commit to this should be politely excused from the group.

These 'holy clubs' could meet as often as every other week, but I suspect that most pastors will find that monthly meetings work best. I would put on a pot of coffee and set aside an entire morning (8 am - noon) for the meeting. You have a lot of work to do!

When you meet, begin by sharing the exegesis that group members have done in advance on your pre-assigned passages. Depending on how often your group meets, you may have two or four passages to talk about. Regardless of how many passages you plan on working through, be sure that everyone comes with their homework done. I would be very firm here and refuse to allow people to attend or participate unless their exegesis is complete. By 'complete' I mean that the big idea of every passage scheduled for that morning is written down and ready to be exegetically defended and discussed. This group is not a place where people can avoid hard work in the biblical text. 'What does this passage mean to you?' should not be allowed. The world has enough 'pooled ignorance;' we don't have to contribute to it.

Start your 'holy club' meeting by having people take turns presenting one of the assigned exegetical ideas. Spend some time trying to reach group consensus on your ideas in the context of the give and take of group discussion. If agreement on an idea is not possible, don't get stuck. Just move on. If a member of the group is constantly lost or way off the mark with their ideas, your group has a problem. This may not be the right group for them. Don't allow one person's exegetical struggles to sabotage the work of the entire group. As the group agrees on exegetical ideas write those ideas on a white board. Now you are ready to start your Closet Work.

Use the summary of the five questions of Closet Work included in the appendix of the book to guide your discussion. When you look backwards, be sure to place your idea in its original historical story. Then be sure you take time metaphoring that idea. Group metaphoring can be very helpful. The process of deciding what metaphors work best and why, will really sharpen people's understanding of the biblical idea.

My hunch is that your group will find the second question, where you look upwards at God, to be the easiest. Not because the question is simple, or because God is, but because it feels safe to look away from our own hearts. For this reason it is important not to let the group spend all of its time here. Deal with it and move on.

The third question is the hardest. Looking inward is not a preacher's preference. We would rather examine other people's lives than our own. But the discussion around 'What is God saying to me in this text?' is critical. It is here, and perhaps only here, where the biblical text and our group members will make sure that we are not just 'playing preacher.' This is where we are 'honest to God' and with his people. This is where genuine intimacy can forge 14-carrot quality relationships. This is where strangers are transformed into friends. Where threatening lions become friendly allies. Pray, weep and laugh together. Just don't lie. And never, ever break a confidence. This is where Dietrich Bonhoeffer's idea of community can become a living reality.²⁸

The fourth question, where we ask what God wants to accomplish through this text in the live of others will also be helpful for your discussion but, if you have already received feedback in advance, you will not have to spend too much time here. And be sure that you do not confess other people's sins, or allow your time together to degenerate into a gripe session. Yes, ministry is tough and our congregants are all sinners; now lets move on.

The fifth question will be very helpful for you to discuss in your 'holy club.' You will find that those members of your group who have walked with God, and led his people the longest will have some important insights to share. They have been around long enough to see how Satan operates. To learn his modus operandi. Some significant teaching and learning can take place here!

End your discussion of the idea of a particular text by talking, in general terms, about how this idea could be preached. The idea is not for all of you to emerge from your 'holy club' meeting with identical sermons. You are all different people preaching in different situations to different people . . . so your sermons should all be unique. But it is helpful to bandy around ideas for everyone to consider. You can help each other become more homiletically creative. Together you can encourage the cautious preachers to take necessary risks . . . and caution the impulsive preachers not to be stupid. Everyone will remain responsible for the sermons that they choose to preach, but wouldn't it be wonderful to have a group of trusted preacher friends to bounce your ideas off of?

Deep preachers understand the importance of getting alone with God to do serious Closet Work. But they also value community.

We are to work and pray for God's kingdom to come, not our own. And we are willing to work together for the glory of God.

Your partners in preaching

Sermon preparation is not supposed to be a lonely task. God does not ask us to 'go it alone.' To combat the loneliness of the preachers study God first gives us his Holy Spirit - to constantly reach out to him in dialogical prayer as we meditate day and night on his word. And, on those occasions when we hit the wall exegetically or homiletically, we can cry out in desperation as we fast.

A further provision that God gives preachers is fellow preachers. The common love that we preachers share for God, God's people and God's word can bind us together into a holy community. Our joint passion for preaching can fuel a deeper passion to know and resemble the God we proclaim. Together we can stir one another on to good works, and deep preaching.

¹ See J. Kent Edwards, *Effective First-Person Biblical Preaching : The Steps from Text to Narrative Sermon*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.

² John 14:16-17 NIV

³ John 16:12-15 NIV

⁴ Luke 24:45 NIV

⁵ *Institutes*, 1:7, 4–5.

⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation : Perspectives on Hermeneutical Issues* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1993). 44-45.

⁷ 2 Corinthians 2:14 NIV

⁸ 1 Corinthians 2:7-13 NIV

⁹ Ephesians 1:17-18 NIV

¹⁰ “Endless possibilities of self-deception and Satanic befoulment open up the moment we lay aside the Word to follow supposedly direct leadings of the Spirit apart from the Word.” J.I Packer. “The Holy Spirit and His Work,” International Council on Biblical Inerrancy Update (August 1985) : 3.

¹¹ Matthew 6:6, KJV

¹² A. W. Tozer, *God's Pursuit of Man* (Camp Hill, PA: WingSpread Publishers, 2007). 79, 80

¹³ 1 Thessalonians 1:5 NIV

¹⁴ Colossians 1:1:9 NIV

¹⁵ Colossians 3:16 NIV

¹⁶ Acts 6:2-4 NIV – emphasis mine

¹⁷ the word προσκαρτερέω is used twice in this verse

¹⁸ e.g. Acts 2:41, 4:4, 10:44, 13:15, 14:12, 17:11, 20:2, 7

¹⁹ words commonly used for preaching in the book of Acts are κηρύσσω (kerusso) which is used 8 times, καταγγέλλω (kataggello) which is used 11 times, and εὐαγγελίζω (euaggelizo) which is used 15 times and διδάσκω (didasko) which is used 16 times.

²⁰ E.g. Acts 1:1, 4:29, 31, 6:7, 8:4, 14, 25, 11:1, 12:24, 13:5, 7, 44, 46, 48, 49, 14:3, 25, 15:15, 35, 36, 16:6, 32, 17:13, 18:11, 19:10, 20, 20:32

²¹ Balz, Horst Robert; Schneider, Gerhard: *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990-c1993) S. 3:306

²² Luke 4:43,44 NIV

²³ Roy Walter Williams, *The Puritan concept and practice of prayer: Private, family and public*. Ph.D. diss., University of London p. 32 as quoted in Stephen Ratliff, *The Strategic role of prayer in preaching*. Unpublished thesis, Trinity International University, 2000. 18

²⁴ David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1971). 170-171

²⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students : Complete & Unabridged*, New ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1954). 43

²⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles : The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1987). 64

²⁷ James 4:2

²⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, [1st ed. (New York,: Harper, 1954).