

Questions about Preaching and Teaching

By Dave Detwiler, Pastor of Teaching & Ceremonies, BranchCreek Community Church – September 2004

Almost no one doubts the importance of preaching and teaching in a local church setting, but almost everyone has questions or opinions about this vital ministry area. Here are a few of those questions:

Are preaching and teaching the same thing?

While we tend to use the word “preaching” in a way that encompasses both activities (that’s how I’ll use it below), there is a distinction to be made: “preaching” often refers specifically to proclaiming the good news about Jesus (evangelism), whereas “teaching” refers more broadly to instructing people in the faith (edification). Jesus both taught and preached (Matt 4:23; 9:35; Luke 20:1), as did the leaders of the early church (Acts 5:42; 15:35). We can do no less.

What are we supposed to be preaching?

We are to “preach the word” (2 Tim 4:2), that is, “the word of God” (Acts 6:2; 18:11; Heb 13:7). This includes the *written* word of God, the Bible, as “All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim 3:16). But it also includes the *living* Word of God, Jesus Christ (John 1:1; Rev 19:13), as “We proclaim *him*” (Col 1:28). If our preaching is not Scripture-saturated and Christ-centered, it is not biblical preaching.

What are the goals of biblical preaching?

It is not enough for the word to be preached; it must be heard and acted upon as well. This is the most basic goal of biblical preaching. Jesus said, “go and make disciples . . . teaching them to *obey* everything I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19-20). He wasn’t looking for mere head knowledge, but a life of obedience, and this should be our aim as well. But what are the specific goals related to this?

First of all, *preaching should help persuade people to become followers of Christ*. This is where disciple-making starts: “They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples” (Acts 14:21). When we come together as a church, there will almost always be outsiders and unbelievers in our midst (1 Cor 14:23-25), and so we must lovingly persuade them to join us in following Jesus. Preaching is more than this, but not less.

Second, *preaching should help provide people with spiritual nourishment*. Jesus said three times to Peter,

“Feed my sheep” (John 21:15-17). Years later, Peter reminded church leaders to “be shepherds of God’s flock” (1 Peter 5:2; cf. Acts 20:28), and this is largely a matter of proper feeding. Further, this requires a balanced spiritual diet, which is why Paul declared, “For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God” (Acts 20:27). To put it another way, if “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching” (2 Tim 3:16), then we should be systematically teaching *all* Scripture (or, as Jesus said, “teaching them to obey *everything* I have commanded you”), so that God’s flock will grow healthy and strong.

Third, *preaching should help present people fully mature in their faith*. Our ultimate goal is not just to help people become followers of Jesus, but to bring them to maturity as his disciples. This is the whole point of providing spiritual nourishment for God’s flock, and represents the fulfillment of Jesus’ call to “make disciples.” Paul makes this goal clear: “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ” (Col 1:28).

Finally, *preaching should help prepare people for the work of ministry*. Those who are maturing in their faith are to be trained and mobilized to use their gifts to serve others (1 Pet 4:10), and preaching contributes to this. Paul explains that pastors and teachers are “to equip God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph 4:12). As we faithfully preach the Bible, “all God’s people [will] be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:17).

Isn’t expository preaching the best approach?

This is a common question, but potentially misleading, as Haddon Robinson explains: “What do we mean by expository preaching? In the broadest sense, it is preaching that draws its substance from the Scriptures. Actually, true exposition is more of an attitude than a method. It is the honest answer to the questions, ‘Do I subject my thought to the Scriptures, or do I subject the Scriptures to my thought?’”¹ Rick Warren defines exposition in this way: “When the message is centered around explaining and applying the text of the Bible for life change.”² So, yes, expository preaching is the best approach, but this can take a number of forms.

What are the primary forms of preaching?

There are essentially two: “verse-by-verse” (often called “expository,” although this confuses things a bit), where there is a “systematic explanation of a portion of Scripture that, by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, can be decisively applied to the lives of the listeners”³; and “verse-with-verse” (commonly called “topical”), where a particular biblical topic is explained and applied through the use of various verses or passages of Scripture (much like I’m doing right now). As Warren reminds us in *The Purpose Driven Church*, “both are necessary in order to grow a healthy church.”⁴

Some benefits of preaching “verse-by-verse”

There are a number of significant benefits to the verse-by-verse approach, especially as it relates to systematically preaching through large portions of the Bible over a period of time:

- It most clearly upholds the authority of the Bible, as the text governs the message (that is, God’s word is clearly being preached).
- It is least likely to stray from the context of a passage, or from the original author’s intended meaning (that is, it is faithful to the text)
- It helps people think through a passage, equipping them to better understand and apply Scripture on their own.
- It provides people with helpful insights and applications beyond what can be gleaned from a casual reading of a passage.
- It forces preachers to address passages that might otherwise have been overlooked or even deliberately avoided.
- It eliminates any curiosity as to why a particular topic was chosen for the preaching that day (that is, no ulterior motive).
- It encourages comprehensiveness in the preaching plan, eventually producing a Bible-taught congregation.

Some benefits of preaching “verse-with-verse”

Similarly, there are some distinct benefits to the verse-with-verse approach:

- It helps people develop greater understanding and application of important biblical themes and topics.
- It allows the preacher to prayerfully discern and address topics that are timely and helpful to the growth and health of the church.
- It can be particularly useful when crafting a series that addresses specific spiritual or

practical needs of those the church is trying to reach.

- It provides for meaningful breaks in the course of teaching verse-by-verse, when a topic that is raised would benefit from more attention.
- It recognizes that there are certain times of the year, such as holidays, when it makes sense to address a particular topic.

Does either approach have any dangers?

Yes. In the verse-with-verse approach, the chief danger is using verses in a way that is not mindful of their context. Because of this, preachers must carefully choose and study each verse in context, so that Scripture is not abused or distorted in support of a topic. In the verse-by-verse approach, the chief danger is getting bogged down in the details of a passage to where we fail to give adequate attention to the larger flow of thought, as well as the application to daily life.

Isn’t one approach “deeper” than the other?

We can obviously go deeper into a biblical topic in verse-with-verse preaching, but we can go deeper into a particular passage in verse-by-verse preaching. And, of course, both can be done in a shallow manner as well—the approach itself does not guarantee depth. But what do we ultimately mean by “deeper”? In the end, the most detailed message ever preached must be deemed shallow if it does not include life application. As James says, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (1:22). As I clarified earlier, this is what preachers are to be aiming for. So when they do help people understand a passage or a topic at a deeper level, it should result in deeper application as well.

Should we be “seeker-sensitive” in preaching?

Let me ask it this way: Should our preaching be as understandable as possible to the outsiders and unbelievers in our midst so that they too can meaningfully respond to God’s word as it is taught? I’ll let you answer that one!

¹ Haddon Robinson, “The Relevance of Expository Preaching” in *Preaching to a Shifting Culture* (Baker, 2004), p. 82.

² Quoted in “Purpose-Driven Preaching: An Interview with Rick Warren,” *Preaching* (Sept-Oct, 2001).

³ Edward Gilbreath, “Farther in and deeper down: Evangelicals of all stripes are reviving the neglected art of expository preaching” in *Christianity Today* (April 1, 2002), p. 52.

⁴ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Zondervan, 1995), p. 296