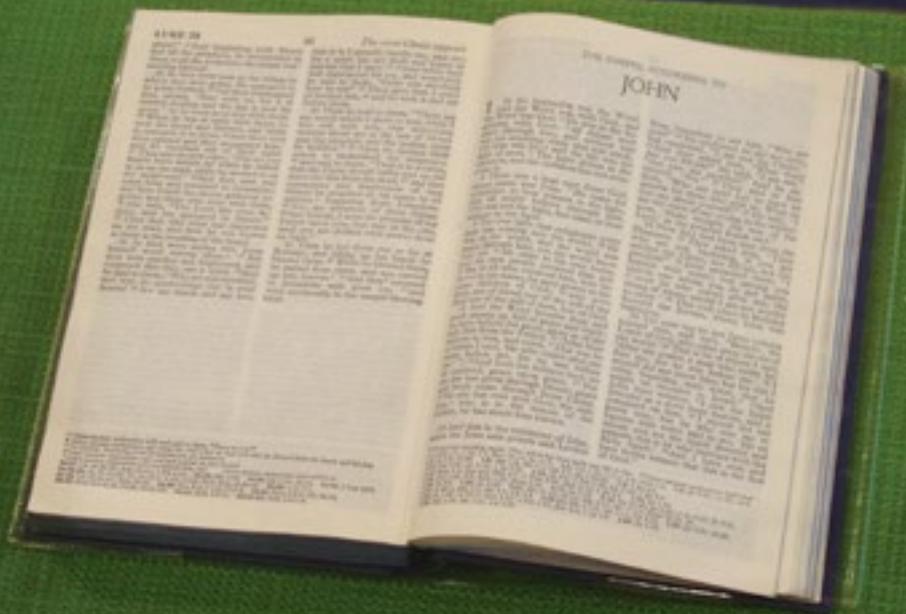




Mission Round Table

The OMF Journal for Reflective Practitioners



Preach the Word!

"... devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching." (1 Tim 4:13)

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Editorial

Walter McConnell

*The B-I-B-L-E. Yes, that's the book for me.
I stand alone on the word of God,
The B-I-B-L-E.*

As a child growing up in church, I learned that the Bible was God's word spoken for the world and for *me*. I learned this through the Bible stories that were taught, the sermons we heard, and the songs we sang. And though it took many years before I understood that the simple words of the song "The B-I-B-L-E" expressed the same deep commitment to Scripture that were so powerfully expressed in Martin Luther's defense at the Diet of Worms—"Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me."—they gave me a real sense that the Bible was a book I needed to know. It was *the book for me*.

This understanding of the Bible was reinforced when the assistant pastor of a church I attended after university began sermons by having everyone hold up their Bibles and repeating a creed.

I believe the Bible.
It is the word of God.
Every word of God is true.
I will gladly receive it today.
Wherever my thinking or actions
differs from what the Bible teaches,
I will change, with God's help.

Christians should readily agree with these words and heartily belt them out when asked to do so. And yet, we are often at a loss to know exactly what it means for the Bible to be God's word. Should our view of inspiration lead us to think that every biblical passage has an equivalent theological and practical importance? Should we, for instance, consider the genealogies recorded in the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles to be of equal spiritual value as the passion narratives in the Gospels or the theological reflections recorded in Romans or Hebrews? Clearly not. How, then, do we deal with biblical genres? Should historical narrative, poetic literature, wisdom, prophets, Gospels, and Epistles all be read the same way? How do we determine the way forward and how do we pass this on to others?

And how are we to receive God's word gladly? If, as Paul commands, we are to "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Phil 4:4), how should this impact our reading of the book of Job or the psalms of lament? Just how gladly can we read the passages that tell of Israel being stranded in the wilderness for forty years or exiled to Babylon for seventy? And how should we respond to Jesus' repeated warning that some people who think they are in a right standing with God will be thrown into "the outer darkness" or "the fiery furnace" where there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; and Luke 13:28)? How can I accept a biblical teaching like this gladly? Or is it just that I should be glad that God has revealed these things and that they have something to teach me in this life as I prepare for the next?

In what way should the Bible change our thinking and practice? What do I need to change and why? What aspects of culture—our native one and our adopted one—are in line with God's purpose and which aren't? What criteria do we use to determine this? How do I use the Bible as a mirror to see where my lifestyle doesn't match Jesus' model? What steps can I take to remove the blemishes? Should we focus on New Testament teaching because it is *new* and *for Christians* while giving less time to the Old Testament because it is *old* and *for the Israelites*? How do we live as countercultural agents of God's kingdom when we live as strangers in a strange land where someone else is in control and may not grant (or renew) the visa we need to be there?

As we work out what living this life looks like, how do we communicate it with the people among whom we work? Sunday School choruses or creeds written in English may not fit well in different linguistic and cultural contexts. How, then, can we pass on the need to love and enjoy and obey the Bible as the word of the eternal God? Clearly, unless we hold Scripture in the highest regard, we cannot persuade others that it is true. And unless we are personally convinced of the truth of what Paul says

in Romans 10:14–17—that preaching is essential for people to come to faith—we may never see people call upon Jesus and be saved. It is thus mandatory that we both believe that the Bible is *the book for me* and learn it and obey it *and* teach others that it is *the book for them* as well.

It is with this end in mind that this issue of *Mission Round Table* has been put together. The articles here are mainly designed to remind us of the need for the Bible to be preached rightly as God's word to God's world so that those who don't know him can become God's people and grow in grace as disciples of Jesus. Preaching God's word—be that the Bible in its entirety or parts or the gospel, the message about Jesus Christ—is an essential task of the church and thus of the missionary. One can rightly say that unless God's word is actively and accurately preached, there can be no mission. We are therefore obliged to consider how well we take in God's word read and preached and how well we communicate the truths that brings life to a world deserving of death.

Our first article addresses how we can hear God's voice as we engage God's word through preaching. Knowing that some readers—and preachers—may misunderstand what expository preaching is and is intended to do, the author begins by defining his understanding that, simply put, "expository preaching aims at effectively communicating to the church and the world the message from the biblical text." This means that preachers must communicate God's word to people in a way that makes sense within their cultural contexts, is appropriate to their way of thinking and learning, and is sensitive to the biblical texts in their grammatical, historical, and literary settings. While executing this faithfully may require diligence coupled with sensitivity, the spiritual needs of our audience demand no less. The author further explores how the culture of the preacher might shape sermon

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The Voice of God in the World of God: Is Expository Preaching Culturally Relative?

PT

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Introduction and thesis

At the outset of his historical study on preaching, O. C. Edwards states that “there is no activity more characteristic of the church than preaching... No other major religion gives preaching quite the central role that it has in Christianity.”¹

Our focus in this paper is the kind of preaching termed *expository* preaching and the question of its cultural relativity. We are evaluating what it is we should consider to be authentic and effective expository preaching when the variables of culture are taken into account. For those committed to expository preaching, the question of culture must be acknowledged in this era of world Christianity and of philosophical awareness of the role culture plays in epistemology and hermeneutics.²

Our thesis is that expository preaching is committed to *effective* understanding and communication of the biblical text with the aim of transformation. What is effective is in significant ways relative to the culture of the *hearers* and of the *expositor*.³ Therefore, expository preaching must appropriately take into account cultural relativity in order to be true to its own aims of effective understanding and communication of Scripture.

After initial definitions, we will begin by laying foundations regarding learning and cognition in general terms that will be applicable to preaching, followed by a brief exploration of biblical normativity and relativity regarding preaching method. We will then use these foundations to examine (1) *expository communication method* in an expository sermon and (2) *the expository exegetical method* in the preparation of an expository sermon. We finish by briefly considering the importance of cultural

relativity for expository preaching in relation to social justice followed by some applications for mission in East Asia.

The health of preaching amongst East Asians should be a passionate concern of all in OMF and beyond, even if it is not everyone’s ministry focus. As evangelicals, it is our conviction that the triune God speaks and acts to save and transform through his written word that is proclaimed. Let us explore how to implement this conviction together in cross-cultural mission.

Expository preaching aims at effectively communicating to the church and the world the message from the biblical text.

Definitions

Expository preaching receives a range of definitions both from its adherents and detractors, and yet, expository preaching remains discernible. Ezekiel Ajibade surveys a range of descriptions and summarises as key characteristics of expository preaching: central propositions, textual/biblical exposition, text-driven, belief in the relationship of the word to the Spirit of God, and the aim at life transformation.⁴ While we accept Ajibade’s characterization as highly accurate, we would question the necessity of central *propositions* to expository preaching, though it would be true to say some expository preaching methods prize propositions. Contra Haddon Robinson, “central idea, proposition, theme, thesis statement, main thought” are not all precisely the same.⁵ A sermon may be expository by capturing a central idea or main thought without expressing that propositionally.

This clarification exposes a critical issue: *what exactly is necessary for a sermon to qualify*

as expository preaching? For example, must the main thrust of a passage be captured in propositional form or are there other legitimate ways to communicate the main thrust? Because of this challenge, we will operate with a minimalist definition to avoid the importation, deliberate or not, of cultural or cosmetic preferences (such as the equating of “main thought” with “proposition”) and to allow ourselves room for cultural variation within a definition of expository preaching if our study deems that fitting.

Our definition is that *expository preaching aims at effectively communicating to the church and the world the message from the biblical text*. This definition captures the widely held commitments summarised by Ajibade of exposition of the biblical text (text-driven, main thought, etc.), as opposed to preaching one’s own personal thoughts or a scattering of texts, and the effective communication of *that* text to the audience of both church and listening world. Space does not permit a thorough defence of this definition. We submit that it reflects expository preaching commitments and serves our exploration of cultural relativity sufficiently.⁶ Our definition avoids specificity as to *how* that exposition and communication is achieved. To that we shall turn in due course.

Robert Allen suggests that confusion in defining expository preaching has arisen over the failure to distinguish whether one is discussing the *expository method of preparation* or sermon *organization*, or, using the terms of our thesis, *expository exegetical method* or

expository *communication*.⁷ Allen also rightly highlights the issue of *efficacy* as paramount. Expository preaching commitments demand that efficacy of communication is important. Following Allen, then, the question of efficacy in both exegetical method and communication will be a central concern, specifically seeking to ascertain how culture impacts efficacy.

1. Foundations

We now turn to consider foundations relating to learning styles, cognition, and biblical normativity.

Learning styles

Craig Ott highlights three dimensions that help us to navigate teaching, learning, and cultures: the universal, cultural, and individual (see Figure 1).⁸

Awareness of these dimensions leads us to expect normativity *and* relativity in communication activities, including expository preaching.

Ott explains that there is normativity on the level of human characteristics, such as common human needs and experiences, as well as rational capacity. (See more on cognition below.) At the same time, within universal normativity, there is cultural variation of learned characteristics of a group. Included in these cultural characteristics are *learning* characteristics.

Ott's discussion of "learning styles" is instructive for expository preaching. Learning styles are generally conceived to be individual learner preferences, personality, and inherent traits or abilities that are innate, fixed, and "predictive of learning performance."⁹ The implication is that teaching is most effective when adapted to these learning styles. Ott notes that, the ubiquity of this concept notwithstanding, "no scholarly consensus has yet emerged about how best to define, categorize, determine, or apply understandings of learning styles."¹⁰ He collates research

that is somewhat devastating to the idea that learning and teaching styles *must* be matched for effective learning.¹¹

However, Ott's conclusion is that awareness of learning *preferences*, including on a cultural level, is important to maintain: "Although the jury is still out regarding many aspects of individual learning styles, there is no question that culturally conditioned differences in learning preferences, expectation, and

Cognition

We can also expect to find both normativity and cultural variation regarding cognitive processes.

Riccardo Viale explores cognitive universality and relativity as shown in research on infants. This research suggests a basic cognitive endowment: "The human mind is equipped with basic cognitive primitives and possesses

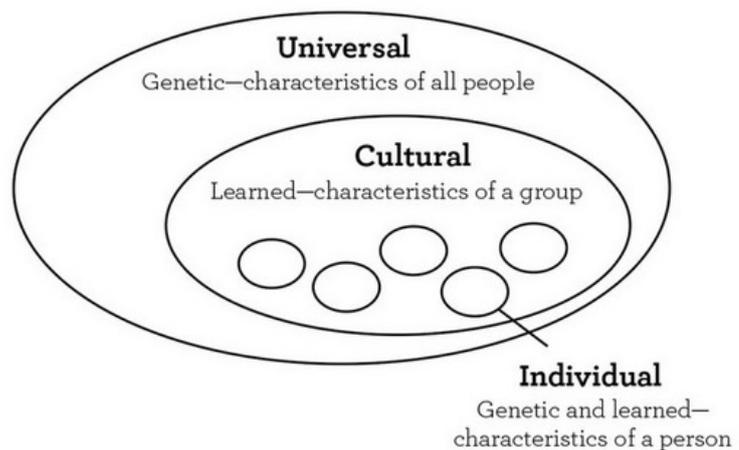


Fig. 1 The universal, cultural, and individual

educational traditions have significant impact on the learning experience."¹² We can, Ott says, "meaningfully speak of culturally preferred teaching styles" while "allowing for individual differences."¹³ One can expect to find, for example, general preferences for reproductive (greater teacher initiative) or productive (greater student initiative) learning styles and different assessments of what constitutes good teaching based upon differing cultural expectations relating to social distance, class participation, and critical thinking.¹⁴

The implication of these educational foundations is that expository preaching, as a form of communication, should expect and take into account *both universal normativity and cultural/individual relativity* in terms of how people learn. A belief in preaching as a supernatural communication form doesn't necessitate the disregard of natural learning realities.

cognitive processes that carry out many tasks, such as exemplar-based categorization, deductive reasoning, causal attribution, and so on."¹⁵ What are we to make, then, of evident cultural variation in cognitive style? According to Viale, "The cultural differences that subsequently emerge in individuals are mainly in response to metaphysical and ontological theories and schemes for representing and interpreting the world."¹⁶ How are the cultural variations, for example, between analytic and holistic cognitive styles of American and East Asian students, to be understood given universal cognitive endowment?¹⁷ Children adjust their basic hypothesis of how the world works over their time of development in response to the empirical evidence and informative inputs of their local environment. Thus, "different cultural practices can make a given cognitive process, which is universally available in principle, accessible in a differentiated way."¹⁸

Expository preaching, as a form of communication, should expect and take into account *both universal normativity and cultural/individual relativity* in terms of how people learn. A belief in preaching as a supernatural communication form doesn't necessitate the disregard of natural learning realities.

For expository preaching, then, we should avoid the mistake of categorizing cultures as “rational” or “non-rational”. We should also not insist that people of all cultures must process rationally in the same way. There are different approaches to reasoning (e.g., formal/abstract versus concrete/functional).¹⁹ Awareness of these differences informs expository preaching in relation to the question of *effective* communication. Effective communication to abstract thinkers may make more ready use of principles abstracted from a biblical narrative since their listeners are adept at accessing reason in a context-independent fashion. For context-dependent reasoners, preaching that trades heavily in propositions abstracted from a narrative literary context will not be effectively communicated to and thus the sermon will have failed its expository commitments.

Biblical normativity

Those committed to expository preaching would want to add to Ott’s schema above the category of “biblical-universal”. Christians committed to the authority of Scripture will want to know if there is biblical-universal prescription for method of communication (the sermon) and method of exegesis (the preparation) that norms cultural relativity. To put it simply: does the Bible tell us what preaching should be like irrespective of culture?

At first recourse, we might be inclined to search for biblical examples of expository preaching. Robert Allen demonstrates the challenge of this—the Old Testament prophets not exegeting inspired Scripture but producing it, and even New Testament “sermons” presenting the challenge of their different time location to the contemporary church in the chronology of incriptionation. Allen concludes: “There appears to be no clear Old Testament example of one who organized a previously written text into discernible parts and commented on those divisions” and “preaching in the New Testament also assumed a great variety of forms.”²⁰ Furthermore, what sermons we do have in the New Testament are almost certainly summaries.

Is there universal-biblical normativity for expository preaching, then? Biblical normativity comes less in the form of model sermons than of *normative ecclesial patterns and injunctions coupled with doctrines that make expository commitments normative for the church.*

Expository preaching is not just another form of teaching. Rather, the nature of its subject and its ecclesial setting demands an announcing, even authoritative quality. Capturing this quality in form will also involve cultural relativity. Nonetheless, an expository sermon form will be biblically normed by the commitment to find a culturally relative way to demonstrate that *this* communicative event, unlike others, is the hearing of the word of God.

John Piper demonstrates Paul’s application of *euangelizomai* and *katangellō*—ordinarily verbs for proclamation outside of the church—to the act of preaching *within* the church for the sake of edification.²¹ Furthermore, 2 Timothy 3:16–4:4 stands as an *injunction* to the preaching (here, *kēryssō*) of the text of Scripture (and therefore, expository) to the church, even if this injunction is not accompanied by a model sermon.²²

For John Stott, commitment to expository preaching flows from theological *doctrines* including about the nature of God as the speaking God; the nature of Scripture as both divinely authoritative and human literature; the continued speech of God to the church; and the nature of the church as dependent on God’s words.²³ Stott’s conclusion about the biblical normativity of expository preaching is significant for our question:

All true Christian preaching should be expository. We misuse this word if we think it applies only to a verse-by-verse explanation of a lengthy passage of Scripture. In reality, “expository” refers to the content of the sermon rather than its style. To “expound” Scripture means to bring out what is in the text, to reveal it. The expositor opens what seems to be closed, makes plain what is confusing, unravels what is knotted, and unfolds what is tightly packed.²⁴

What Stott concludes is that there is no biblically normative form—i.e., final communication style of sermon. Thus, in relation to culture, expository preaching doesn’t biblically require a certain form for all cultures and places. What may be considered “true Christian preaching”—i.e., normative—is a certain “content”, by which Stott means the fundamental commitment that the biblical text is the exposed and communicated message of the sermon.

There is a further biblical consideration due to the *ecclesial setting* of preaching as distinguished from general teaching; Piper concludes from his study of New Testament words relating to preaching:

Preaching was not ordinary conversation. Nor was it identical to teaching. Both *euangelizomai* (“preach good news”) and *kēryssō* (“preach” or “herald”) have the quality of announcement, and since the specific Christian content of the announcement is the good news of Christ’s saving work ... the announcement quality was not disapproval or indifference, but commendation and acclamation.²⁵

Therefore, it wouldn’t be true to say that *whatever* culturally relative communication methods are effective towards these aims are legitimate. Expository preaching is not just another form of teaching. Rather, the nature of its subject and its ecclesial setting demands an announcing, even authoritative quality. Capturing this quality in form will also involve cultural relativity. Nonetheless, an expository sermon form will be biblically normed by the commitment to find a culturally relative way to demonstrate that *this* communicative event, unlike others, is the hearing of the word of God.²⁶

2. Expository communication

With these foundations in place, we turn to consider *expository communication method* relative to culture.

We will elucidate our claim that effective, culturally relative communication methods are legitimate to expository preaching by exploring the implications of the foundations discussed above, highlighting an historical precedent, and then considering a contemporary example.

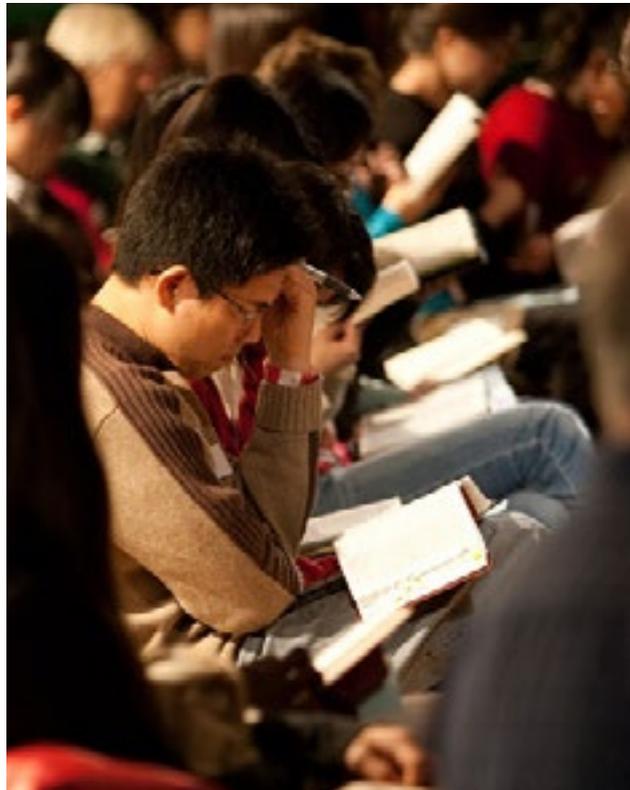
Building on foundations

We have seen from Stott that biblical normativity for expository preaching is in its fundamental commitments and not its final form. Given the variations we can reasonably expect due to differing cultural learning preferences and cognitive styles, what form most effectively communicates the thoughts of a portion of Scripture can legitimately vary. In fact, we would go further as to say they should vary. Far from expository preaching requiring uniform style, its commitments *should* rather *require pluriform style*. This is not only so because of the variety of genres in Scripture which expository preaching ought to reflect in order to embody in its form the mode of communication of the text itself. Pluriformity of style is also required because of the commitment to communicate the message of the text *to the hearers*, grasped in such a way that their lives are changed. If, as suggested above, people hear, grasp, and process differently, then expository preaching must take this into account or fail its own aims.

According to Ahmi Lee, some hold the assumption of a normative sermonic form. She describes “thematic preaching” with its origins in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries which has a “systematic division of points and subpoints that fall under the main theme of the text” which “not only assumes that there is more or less one preferred meaning to the biblical text but also assumes that there is one preferred way to communicate it, which is a deductive approach... As suggested by the well-known moniker ‘three-points-and-a-poem,’ the legacy of thematic sermons is easily observable even today.”²⁷ This approach would resist cultural relativity regarding expository method of communication and insist on a normative, deductive, and logically structured form. Given the evidence explored, holding to a certain form as a *requirement* for expository

preaching must be questioned as an imposition of cultural preference.

The twentieth century saw the rise of the so-called “New Hermeneutic”, in part as a reaction against such normativity of form. It is not within our scope to explore this movement in depth. Nonetheless, we do well to acknowledge the role it has played in the West, at the very least, in raising questions about sermonic form.²⁸ However, after examining the deductive versus inductive antithesis that often characterises the New Hermeneutic debate, Ajibade concludes that “those who strongly advocate for the inductive method or the deductive have not been able to prove adequately that one of them is more ‘spiritual’ or biblical than the other.”²⁹



Historical precedent

Rhetorical variation for the sake of effective Christian communication has historical precedent in Augustine. Building on Cicero’s three aims of the orator—to teach, to delight, and to move—Augustine states that “of these three ... the teaching, which is a matter of necessity, depends on what we say;

the other two on the way we say it.”³⁰ That is, the *form* of communication matters according to its ability to delight and move the listener to the point of action: “For if a man be not moved [to action] by the force of truth, though it is demonstrated to his own confession, and clothed in beauty of style, nothing remains but to subdue him by the power of eloquence.”³¹ According to Augustine, then, attention *must* be paid to how the listeners hear so that the truth of Scripture may not only be understood, but embraced to the point of transformation: “But as there is a certain analogy between learning and eating, the very food without which it is impossible to live must be flavored to meet the tastes of the majority.”³² Following Augustine, expository preaching

communication should be rhetorically “flavoured” according to the cultural learning and cognitive styles to teach, delight, and move.

A contemporary example

Ezekiel Ajibade provides a robust contemporary example. After a far-reaching analysis of orality in Africa, Ajibade suggests a range of different ways to “flavour” expository sermons to suit audiences of African oral learners.³³ He explains the place of oral communication methods as thoroughly integrated in expository sermon form:

The value of the oral elements of stories, songs, drama, proverbs, and folklore becomes relevant at this point. They are the

channels of communication in Africa. None of them is qualified to take the position of a sermon, but the concept of orality does not regard them as mere tools. Therefore, it becomes evident that preachers in Africa might consider a shift from the traditional monologue sermon to a variety of styles that incorporate orality or express content through orality.³⁴

Ajibade distinguishes between oral communicative elements playing a *supportive* or a *substantive* role: “Supportive roles can be using these oral elements for introducing, illustrating, or concluding a sermon, while the sermon content is

Far from expository preaching requiring uniform style, its commitments should rather require pluriform style.

pure biblical exposition. Substantive roles are when any of the oral elements become the direct medium through which exposition is done.”³⁵ It seems to us that “pure biblical exposition” is something of a misnomer, as we have established that all expository preaching takes a form that is culturally shaped. If Ajibade’s approach to orality in expository preaching is right, then a sung exposition that truly meets the aims of expository preaching is no less pure than a monologue.

Ajibade takes into account our biblical foundation of the authoritative, declarative quality of expository preaching and its interaction with orality. For him, use of oral communication methods is not anti-authoritarian: “Orality is simply a mediation of authority through the communication language and experience of the people.”³⁶

He goes on to describe many examples of different oral communication methods that could be used, such as song, drama, poetry, folklore, and storytelling. But Ajibade is rigorous in his expository preaching commitments at all times, demonstrating how the cultural relativity of communication methods must be normed by expository commitments: “If a drama will go beyond a supportive role of introducing, illustrating, or concluding a sermon, it must show the character of biblical exposition that can make people see Scripture, hear it explained, and make certain concrete decisions.”³⁷

3. Expository exegetical method

Having established the parameters of cultural relativity in expository preaching regarding communication, we now briefly turn to the actual *exegetical method* of sermon preparation.

We wish to question Robert Allen’s statement that “the method of sermon preparation, grounded in a high view of Scripture and founded on a historical-grammatical exegesis, remains normative for today’s preacher because that is the only method by which we can be sure we will indeed “preach the word.”³⁸ If the method of expository *communication* has both normative commitments and relativity due to the culture of the listeners, should it not follow that expository *exegetical method* also has normative commitments *and* relativity due to the culture of the preacher?



Normative rules of biblical texts

The biblical text does have a norming effect on exegetical method: “Understanding texts ... is a matter of learning these rules to the point of being able to follow them. Writing and reading alike thus involve ‘communicative competence’: the practical know-how that grasps grammatical and generic rules.”³⁹ Texts have grammar, historical settings, and literary rules by which we must play in order to exegete competently. These rules are a given of the text irrespective of the expositor’s culture. Furthermore, Christian commitments demand that Scripture be read as a unified communicative act of God, and so any individual passage must be competently read as part of the whole with its divine intentions.⁴⁰ If “understanding ... is a matter of grasping what an author is doing in a text,”⁴¹ then any exegetical method, irrespective of culture, must grasp what the human and divine author are doing in order to fulfil expository preaching aims.

Relative rules of engaging biblical texts

However, *how* exactly one goes about grasping the meaning of a text is another question. Given our foundations above, we should expect that the preacher too has learning preferences, cognitive styles,

and individuality that are not checked at the door in preparation of the sermon.

Once again, we find John Stott to be flexible regarding expository preaching method: “How, then, should we prepare? There is no one answer, for there is no one way to prepare sermons. Every preacher has to work out a method that suits their personality and situation.”⁴²

Steffen and Bjoeraker distinguish textual hermeneutics and oral hermeneutics. Textual hermeneutics focusses on “grammatical analysis, lexical tools requiring linear, line-by-line, word-by-word studies, definitions. This is then packaged clearly and crisply in systematic categories after hours of often private study and little immediate feedback.”⁴³ Oral hermeneutics, on the other hand, “champions collectivism, volunteerism, the big picture ... and the progressive repetition of repeated themes. It also employs specific schema that assist memory, often enhanced through rhythm, rhyme, echo... the visual, formulaic sayings and structures, group participation, and accumulated meaning, all immediately experienced.”⁴⁴ While their analysis is replete with oversimplifications and generalisations, it is useful to prompt us to consider that exegetical method, too, is culturally shaped.

Grant Osborne’s method for grammatical analysis involves a study sheet divided into

Christian commitments demand that Scripture be read as a unified communicative act of God, and so any individual passage must be competently read as part of the whole with its divine intentions.

The question of whether the preaching we're seeing and nurturing is both indigenous and biblical is of paramount importance to the fulfilment of our mission. Put another way, church planting that reproduces preaching that is either culturally ineffective or falls short of biblical commitments fails to let East Asians effectively hear God's voice. What is our mission if it is not for East Asian's billions to hear him speak life and light to them?

columns, starting with the text itself, the second with "grammatical identification..." and in the third the grammatical-syntactical information... The fourth column should be reserved for lexical study and the fifth for historical-cultural backgrounds. A final column may be used for application."⁴⁵ Now, Osborne does not insist that this is a universal method. But it serves an example of which we can ask: Could the grammar of a text and its significance be encountered by the preacher in ways that are less analytical?

Ott suggests that holistic cognitive styles struggle with this kind of grammatical analysis.⁴⁶ Therefore, let us ask how community and immediate experience might be part of the exegetical process. A psalm, for example, may legitimately be exegeted through a flow-diagramming method. But one imagines how a psalm could also be exegeted through repetitive group singing, the constituent parts (e.g., parallelisms, merisms) being observed through a collective/experiential method. A text may be exegeted in a more communal fashion, with community discussion and insights being shared during preparation in contrast to the image of the lone preacher at their desk. Throughout these various approaches, the biblical text is being *effectively* encountered and experienced *culturally*, its grammatical and syntactical contours delineated, its content comprehended in order to be preached to the church. We found the literature to be underdeveloped on this point and would welcome further research.

4. Socially just expository preaching

We finish by briefly attending to why our question matters. A parallel discussion

to ours considers children's literacy education and testing. Aukerman and Chambers Schuldt highlight the issue of social justice in literary assessment. Put simply, if infant literary competence criteria favour one culture's literary competencies, it will be unjust in limiting other children's future education and opportunities.⁴⁷ Parallel to what we have argued regarding expository preaching, they hold that what is considered "good" reading is socially, culturally, and historically influenced. Reading is a cultural practice as well as a cognitive one. Rather than focussing on a narrow band of literary skills that may favour



one culture, they advocate aiming towards measuring "textual dexterity [which] represents the full repertoire of capacities readers draw on as they read and engage with others around text."⁴⁸

If under-appreciation of the range of culturally influenced literary competencies hinders the literary potential of children via the gates of

narrow literacy testing, then so too under-appreciation of the full range of culturally influenced competencies that constitute "biblical textual dexterity" will hinder the effective preaching of the word of God in all cultures. The gatekeepers of expository preaching are those who administer training, certify, and ordain preachers. They determine what is "good" preaching. What injustice would result from disqualifying preachers on the basis of culturally narrowed criteria of expository preaching competency, or depriving churches of preachers equipped and permitted to preach in a way that carries the communicative "flavour" most effective for them? For those committed to expository preaching, this is an unthinkable scenario as the very goal of this approach is the unfolding of God's word to all his people.

5. Applications for mission to East Asians

The question of whether the preaching we're seeing and nurturing in our ministry is both indigenous and biblical is of paramount importance to the fulfilment of our mission as OMF. We are evangelicals, convinced that God speaks to the world and the church through Scripture preached. Furthermore, ours is a church-centred mission, desiring to see indigenous biblical church movements.

Therefore, church planting that reproduces preaching that is either culturally ineffective or falls short of biblical commitments fails to let East Asians effectively hear God's voice. What is our mission if it is not for East Asian's billions to hear him speak life and light *to them*?

On the other hand, a renewed attention to the nature of preaching in East

Asia will surely produce the long-lasting fruit we desire. Here are some questions for our consideration:

- Are we envisioning a new generation of Asian church leaders with the core expository preaching commitments *of preaching that aims at effectively communicating to the church and the world the message from the biblical text?* Do we and our local partners believe that preaching that unfolds the message of the biblical text is essential to the church hearing her Saviour's voice?
- Does our preaching training address cultural difference in both communication style *and* exegesis/preparation style? What varying indigenous practices are there for truly expository exegetical method and delivery that we've witnessed or developed that can be shared to equip others?



- Who are the gatekeepers of preaching in our contexts? Are we or our local partners guilty of social injustice because of narrow cultural gates imposed from the outside or within? Are there gifted preachers that East Asia's church is missing out on because our imaginations have limited what is "good" preaching beyond core biblical commitments?

Conclusion

Expository preaching is a set of biblically grounded commitments towards the effective communication of the message of the Bible to contemporary hearers. Based upon the normativity and

cultural relativity in the foundations of learning preferences, cognitive styles, and the biblical data, we have found that expository preaching should embrace cultural variance in both expository communication and exegetical method in order to fulfil its commitment to effective communication of Scripture. Furthermore, approaches to expository preaching that can utilise the full range of biblical textual dexterity available to the world-wide church will contribute to a just situation where the message of Scripture is made available to all.

While preaching is an ancient art, it is in great need of the best of contemporary reflection and practice, not least amongst East Asia's peoples. **MRT**

¹ O. C. Edwards, *A History of Preaching*, Volume 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2016), xxviii.

² For the former, see Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 7–8. For the latter, see Elizabeth Yao-Hwa Sung, "Culture and Hermeneutics," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. (London: SPCK and Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 150–55.

³ We would add the nature of the text also impacts expository preaching method, but that study is beyond our scope. For this, see Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman, eds., *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

⁴ Ezekiel A. Ajibade, *Expository Preaching in Africa: Engaging Orality for Effective Proclamation* (Carlisle: HippoBooks, 2021), Chapter 1.

⁵ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), Chapter 2.

⁶ Our definition would concur, for example, with the fuller description in Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), Chapter 1, "Expository Preaching". Also, it is not our concern in this essay to defend expository preaching over and against other forms of preaching. The commitment to expository preaching as *a*, if not *the*, legitimate form of preaching must be assumed. For a helpful taxonomy of various kinds of preaching—though surprising for denying John MacArthur and John Piper the label "expository"—see R. T. Johnson Raih, *Expository Preaching in a World of Spiritual Nominalism: Exploring the Churches in India's Northeast* (Carlisle: Langham Monographs, 2021), Appendix 1.

⁷ Robert A. Allen, "The Expository Sermon - Cultural or Biblical?," *SOR Faculty Publications and Presentations* 177 (1998), https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/sor_fac_pubs/177 (accessed 24 May 2024).

⁸ Craig Ott, *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures: A Guide to Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 29–30.

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⁹ Ott, *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures*, 48–49.

¹⁰ Ott, *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures*, 48.

¹¹ Ott, *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures*, 51.

¹² Ott, *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures*, 53.

¹³ Ott, *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures*, 54.

¹⁴ Ott, *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures*, 57, 177–99.

¹⁵ Riccardo Viale, "Introduction: Local or Universal Principles of Reasoning," in *Biological and Cultural Bases of Human Inference*, ed. Daniel Andler, Lawrence Hirschfeld, and Riccardo Viale (Mahwah, NJ: Psychology, 2013), Introduction.

¹⁶ Viale, "Introduction."

¹⁷ For this distinction, see Ott, *Teaching and Learning across Cultures*, 113–31.

¹⁸ Viale, "Introduction."

¹⁹ Ott, *Teaching and Learning across Cultures*, 79.

²⁰ Allen, "The Expository Sermon - Cultural or Biblical?" Even Nehemiah 8:8 only demonstrates the principles of expository preaching; we do not know its form.

²¹ John Piper, *Expository Exultation: Christian Preaching as Worship* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 66–69.

²² For Piper's careful analysis of this text and its implications for expository preaching, see Piper, *Expository Exultation*, 70–79.

²³ John R. W. Stott and Greg Scharf, *The Challenge of Preaching*, abridged and updated (Carlisle: Langham Preaching Resources, 2013), Chapter 2.

²⁴ Stott and Scharf, *The Challenge of Preaching*, Chapter 2.

²⁵ Piper, *Expository Exultation*, 54–55. See also Low's description of preaching through the import of these terms. Maggie Low, *Preaching That Comes Alive: Delivering a Word from the Lord* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2017), Chapter 1.

²⁶ As captured in the Second Helvetic Confession, Chapter I.

²⁷ Ahmi Lee, *Preaching God's Grand Drama: A Biblical-Theological Approach* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 19.

²⁸ For an overview of the origins and characteristics of the New Hermeneutic, see O. Wesley Allen Jr., "Introduction: The Pillars of the New Hermeneutic," in *The Renewed Homiletic*, ed. O. Wesley Allen Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

²⁹ Ajibade, *Expository Preaching in Africa*, Chapter 2.

³⁰ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. J. F. Shaw (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2009), IV, 12.

³¹ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, IV, 13.

³² Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, IV, 11.

³³ Ajibade, *Expository Preaching in Africa*, Chapter 4.

³⁴ Ajibade, *Expository Preaching in Africa*, Chapter 4.

³⁵ Ajibade, *Expository Preaching in Africa*, Chapter 5.

³⁶ Ajibade, *Expository Preaching in Africa*, Chapter 4.

³⁷ Ajibade, *Expository Preaching in Africa*, Chapter 5.

³⁸ Allen, "The Expository Sermon - Cultural or Biblical?"

³⁹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), Chapter 6.

⁴⁰ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, Chapter 6.

⁴¹ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, Chapter 6.

⁴² Stott and Scharf, *The Challenge of Preaching*, Chapter 5.

⁴³ Tom A. Steffen and William Bjoraker, *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics: As Good Today as It Was for the Hebrew Bible and First-Century Christianity* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2020), Chapter 1.

⁴⁴ Steffen and Bjoraker, *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics*, Chapter 1.

⁴⁵ Grant R. Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010), Part 1, Chapter 2.

⁴⁶ Ott, *Teaching and Learning across Cultures*, 113.

⁴⁷ Maren Aukerman and Lorien Chambers Schuldt, "What Matters Most? Toward a Robust and Socially Just Science of Reading," *Reading Research Quarterly* 56, no. S1 (May 2021): 86.

⁴⁸ Aukerman and Chambers Schuldt, "What Matters Most?," 87.

Preaching and Mission

Phil Nicholson



Phil Nicholson is from Australia and has been working with OMF in Taiwan since 1992. Previously he worked with university students and then as the Field Director for Taiwan. Since 2016 he has been seconded to serve with Langham Preaching as the East Asia Regional Coordinator. This involves organising and facilitating preaching training activities for Asian church leaders across the region and equipping local leaders to pass on what they have learned.

Churches live, grow and flourish by the Word of God, and they languish and die without it.... whenever the Word of God is faithfully expounded and applied, congregations grow in both size and depth. – John Stott¹

What place does biblical preaching have in the work of world mission? It is foundational for all mission endeavors. And for OMF International, it must be a central component of our strategy to establish healthy growing churches amongst East Asia's peoples.

Understanding preaching is not just relevant for those of us who are preachers, but for everyone involved in the work of establishing indigenous biblical church movements. It impacts the type of training we provide for leaders, gives us guidelines for evaluating the health of the church, and informs decisions about when to hand ministry over to indigenous leadership.

This essay explores the importance of biblical preaching in the growth of the early church as described in the New Testament and discusses how this should impact the churches of East Asia today. A particular focus will be the work of Langham Preaching that is designed to raise the level of biblical preaching across the world.

But what is “biblical preaching”? It is preaching based on the exposition and application of God's word in the Scriptures. It is commonly described as “expository preaching”. But since this terminology is often misunderstood as referring to a particular style of preaching, particularly a Western, analytical approach to the Bible, the more neutral term “biblical preaching” will be used here. In biblical preaching, the content and form of the message is drawn from the biblical text (usually one primary text), rather than starting from a topic or idea chosen by the preacher.

Preaching and mission in the book of Acts

In the book of Acts, the preaching of God's word is presented as one key

factor in the growth of the church throughout the Roman world.

Acts includes a number of summary statements showing how the gospel spreads and bears fruit regardless of the challenges and obstacles it faces.² Notice the focus in these summary statements below.

“So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.” (Acts 6:7 NIV)

“Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.” (Acts 9:31)

“But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.” (Acts 12:24)

“The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.” (Acts 13:49)

“So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.” (Acts 16:5)

“In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.” (Acts 19:20)

“In Rome Paul proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!” (Acts 28:31)

Acts records a movement of the word of God. The markers of growth focus on the word. The triumph of this word is seen through increasing numbers of believers and churches being established and strengthened. The concern of the writer of Acts is to show that all this is a

result of the proclamation of God's word through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Apart from these key summary statements, Acts includes the contents of a number of sermons. These reveal that the message preached was centred on the risen Lord Jesus who has come in fulfilment of Old Testament hopes. Acts also shows the churches as listening to, examining, and obeying God's word. And the apostles describe their priority as "prayer and the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4).

The ministry of the word in Acts is not identical to biblical preaching today. The type of preaching presented in Acts is mostly evangelistic in nature, and there were no New Testament Scriptures at that time. So, the "word" in this context primarily refers to the gospel of Jesus Christ along with explanations of Old Testament texts that point to and affirm this gospel message. But despite these differences, it is clear that the proclamation of God's revealed word is the foundation of the church.

This is confirmed by a number of statements found in the New Testament Epistles. Paul describes his ministry as preaching the word of God, the gospel of Christ (1 Cor 1:17, 2 Cor 4:5, 1 Thess 2:13). And he describes this word as powerful to change lives and bear fruit wherever it is proclaimed (Col 1:6).

In Paul's Epistles to Timothy, the proclamation of the word is not just the role of the apostles or for the sake of evangelism. It is also central to ministry within the church. And when Paul commands Timothy to preach the word (2 Tim 4:2), the context of 2 Timothy 3:15–17 indicates that this means explaining and applying the Old Testament Scriptures, not just proclaiming the gospel. Timothy is to prioritise the reading, teaching, and applying of the Scriptures (1 Tim 4:13–16, 2 Tim 3:16–4:4), and he is to train others to do the same (2 Tim 2:2). The instructions given to Timothy describe the biblical context that is closest to us today.

Looking back into the Old Testament, we see the ministry of the priest Ezra is an excellent example of this. He was used to renew the people of God after the exile. God did this through his preaching which explained and applied the law of Moses to the lives of the

returnees (Neh 8:1–18). He was described as having "devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). His life's focus was to know, to obey, and to teach God's word to God's people. These three commitments are repeated in Paul's instructions to Timothy as well (e.g., 1 Tim 4:13–16).

This brief biblical overview provides a foundation to understand preaching today. The preaching and teaching ministry in the church is to be based on what God has revealed through his Son Jesus Christ and recorded in his written word. Today, it is through the inspired Scriptures that we have access to know the person of Jesus and the gospel message. And so for us, "preaching the word" is preaching from the Scriptures. It is preaching that is concerned to explain this word and to apply it to the lives of the hearers.

Preaching and mission in history

Tracing the place of preaching across the history of the church and mission is beyond the scope of this article. But one clear example is the importance of biblical preaching during the Reformation. The reformers were committed to the translation and

The role of preaching is rarely emphasised in mission circles today. In some cases, it may simply be assumed rather than actively promoted or taught.

proclamation of God's word as the foundation of the church. They sought a revival of the word that had been replaced by ritual and mysticism in much of the church of their time.

Martin Luther said that "a Christian congregation should never gather together without the preaching of God's Word and prayer... Therefore, when God's Word is not preached, one had better neither sing nor read, or even come together."³ It is estimated that he preached over 4,000 sermons during his lifetime, and the other reformers had a similar focus. The start of the Reformation in Switzerland at the beginning of 1519 was marked by Ulrich Zwingli preaching from Matthew 1 and expounding the New Testament systematically week by week.

E. C. Dargan writes:

The great events and achievements of that mighty revolution were largely the work of preachers and preaching; for it was by the Word of God, through the ministry of earnest men who believed, loved and taught it, that the best and most enduring work of the Reformation was done.⁴

This is what we would recognise today as expository preaching.

A similar pattern was seen during the Great Awakening that spread across the English-speaking world in the eighteenth century. The leaders of that movement, George Whitefield and John Wesley, were estimated to have each preached tens of thousands of sermons.

And the roots of the modern mission movement can be traced back to these periods of reformation and renewal. Our mission forefathers, such as William Carey and Hudson Taylor, were the fruit of this emphasis on preaching and hearing the word of God.

Preaching and mission today

So, what is the place of preaching in mission today?

The role of preaching is rarely emphasised in mission circles today. In some cases, it may simply be assumed rather than actively promoted or taught. Even so, at times it is also actively sidelined in favour of other ministry methods and strategies. This can be due to a number of factors. Most seriously, some may question or deny the authority, relevance, or sufficiency of the Bible itself. So, ministry becomes focused on other activities that are seen as more effective or urgent. The loss of confidence in the Scriptures seen in many sending countries is reflected in the beliefs and priorities of those who are sent.

And while evangelicals uphold the importance of the Bible, the busyness and demands of ministry may cause the study and teaching of the Scriptures to be neglected. The apostles dealt with

If the preaching of the word is not a priority, then we can expect that whatever churches are planted will be weak, immature, and easily swayed by error, tempted to compromise, or destroyed by suffering.

this pressure when they ensured the feeding of the widows was addressed while at the same time affirming their priority was prayer and ministry of the word (Acts 6:1–7). Ministries today do not always avoid the danger of neglecting the word while dealing with other good and urgent matters.

Furthermore, even when the importance of the Scriptures is affirmed, the need for preaching is sometimes questioned. A desire to contextualise communication methods to cultures that are more influenced by multimedia, images, or storytelling may lead to questioning the effectiveness of preaching. Others downplay the role of a qualified teacher/preacher to help explain the meaning of the text, preferring to focus on discussion and dialogue when teaching the Scriptures.

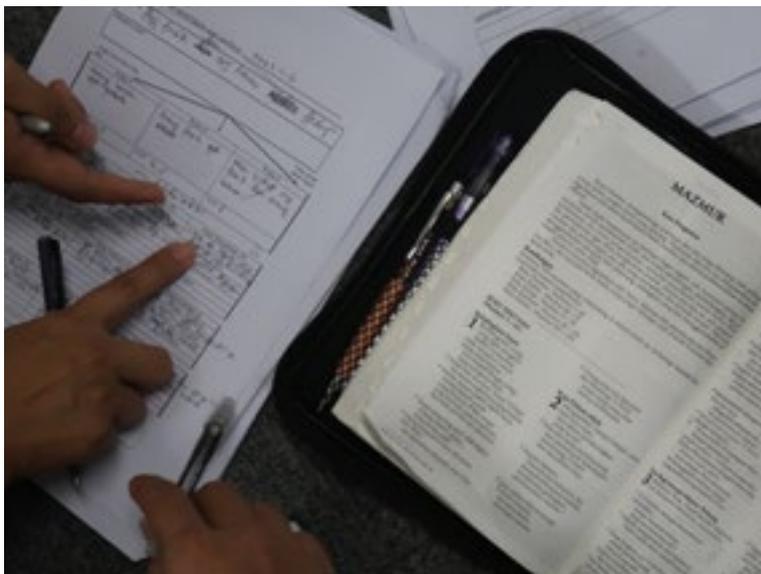
None of these communication methods are in themselves opposed to biblical preaching. Biblical preaching is not primarily a methodology but an ethos. Its concern is that God's word is proclaimed, heard, understood, and applied. This can be done using many methods appropriate to the different genres and forms in the Scriptures. For example, Bible storytelling can be one effective way of "preaching" narrative texts when it performs the function of revealing and applying God's word to the lives of the hearers.

The problem is when ministry strategies are built around a particular method of communication rather than the broader biblical categories of preaching and teaching.⁵ The result is that preaching may be removed from its principal place within the church to become optional or of secondary importance.

What is important is that the starting point for ministry is the word of God, and that we allow this word to shape

both the content and form of our preaching. Biblical preaching is based on a conviction that it is God's word, not our methods, that will lead to changed lives and healthy growing churches.

The goal of preaching is to open the Bible so that believers can understand it. On the one hand, it seeks to avoid spoon-feeding the preacher's ideas and opinions as is often done with topical preaching. On the other hand, it does not rely on people understanding the Scriptures by themselves without help from trained teachers (as is often the case in Bible study discussions). The goal is that biblically equipped preachers will help believers to hear and understand what God is saying from the Scriptures for themselves through the message preached. Biblical preaching also trains believers to read and understand God's word themselves.



One other possible reason for the neglect of preaching is that many mission workers do not see themselves as preachers or feel confident to preach or teach. Compared with seminary training for pastors, many mission training programmes provide less input on preaching and other subjects related to church leadership. They are more concerned with issues of culture, contextualisation, and evangelism. If missionaries are not competent preachers themselves, they will not be able to train or mentor indigenous church leaders in this role.

There is a need for mission workers who are committed to understanding God's word, and preaching and teaching it in a way that it is clearly understood and appropriately applied, and also able to equip local church leaders to do the same.

When we evaluate our mission efforts today, it is worth asking:

- Are we well qualified to interpret and teach or preach the Scriptures to others?
- Is the preaching and teaching of God's word central to our ministry?
- Are we equipping local church leaders to understand and preach God's word?

If the preaching of the word is not a priority, then we can expect that whatever churches are planted will be weak, immature, and easily swayed by error, tempted to compromise, or destroyed by suffering.

Preaching in East Asia today

In the rest of this article, I want to share my personal observations about the state of biblical preaching in East Asia today and my experiences in training preachers. These observations are based on training preachers in more than ten different countries in East Asia for the past eight years.

What is the state of preaching across East Asia? Because of the great diversity of cultures and churches in the region, any answer to this question involves generalisations. Even so, I would like to make four observations:

1. Lack of resources

It is estimated that about 80 percent of those who serve in pastoral ministry around the world will not receive any formal theological training.⁶ This is true in East Asia as well. In Asia's

urban middle-class churches, this may be hard to believe since most pastors have received at least degree-level training. And many churches have multiple well-trained staff members. But in rural churches, in slums, and in smaller towns, people often take on pastoral responsibilities with little or no formal training. The percentage is even higher when we consider lay leaders who also have preaching responsibilities in their local churches.

Unfortunately, many who have received formal theological education are still not well equipped for biblical preaching. Formal educational methods (such as in seminary) are not always the best way to gain practical skills. This may be due to schools emphasising knowledge rather than providing opportunities to practice ministry skills like preaching. And many homiletics classes teach models of communications rather than core skills of biblical interpretation, exposition, and preaching. Even seminary professors often confess that they lack confidence and knowledge in how to preach well.

The lack of resources also includes literature needed to help with Bible study and sermon preparation. This is especially true in rural regions where local rather than national languages are used. Many people who are responsible to preach may not have any resources beyond the Bible itself. And the Bible they use may only be in the national language rather than their own local language or dialect.

It is common to meet preachers who have not read through the whole Bible, are vague about the overall biblical storyline, and, in particular, are unfamiliar with much of the Old Testament.

Unfortunately, the abundance of material on the internet has not helped this situation. Most of the good resources are limited to English and a couple of other major languages. And there is so much poor or false teaching available that many are not able to discern what is good and what is bad. Sometimes those who have limited English are better protected from error because of this!

2. Busy schedules

Another challenge for many pastors is lack of time for adequate sermon preparation. Research by Langham

Preaching discovered that one in five preachers attending training events did not prepare their sermon before preaching. (I assume they had thought about what they would say, but did not spend any time formally studying or writing their message.) And the average preparation time for a sermon was only five hours. Many preachers are bi-vocational as they need to earn a living. Others serve alone in a church and have complex pastoral demands in needy congregations that push preaching aside. Being willing to spend adequate time preparing to preach demands strong convictions about the importance of preaching and a willingness to make sacrifices to find the time to do this well.

3. Pragmatic approach

Preachers sincerely want to help their congregations know the Lord Jesus and grow in their faith. So, most preaching tends to be addressed to their immediate practical and spiritual needs. The most common model of preaching is topical, and topics are chosen week by week according to what the preacher feels is needed at the time.

Although the desire for practical sermons is admirable, it means that preaching is mostly very light on biblical and theological content. And topics tend to be repeated often according to the concerns and focus of the preacher and tend to be on the needs of the church and the “spiritual” life of the believers, rather than topics that address broader social issues or the challenges of living faithfully as God’s people in society.

Few have considered how to preach “the whole counsel of God.” Thus, preaching tends to be needs-driven rather than a part of a deliberate plan to grow disciples whose faith is built on strong biblical foundations.

A helpful illustration is that preaching is seen more as medicine rather than as food. That is, it is used to “heal” sicknesses and weaknesses in believers and churches when they appear. Inherent in this approach is an expectation of

immediate results. The alternative is to use preaching to build up the body through a healthy diet of God’s word over time. The results are less immediately obvious, but healthy bodies are stronger and more resistant to spiritual sickness.

4. Desire to learn

Despite these problems, there is a great desire amongst many pastors and lay preachers to learn and grow in their ministry skills, including preaching. Pastors are aware of their responsibility to “preach the word” and know that they need to be better equipped. They often feel guilty about the lack of time they have been able to devote to preaching. And many are delighted when they are given an opportunity for more practical on-the-job training. This includes a desire to know God’s word better and to develop in their ability to prepare and present sermons that are faithful to God’s word and relevant to the congregation.

The weakness of much preaching is usually not due to the laziness or neglect of preachers. Rather, it is because they have not been well equipped or supported in how to fulfil this key aspect of their ministry.

A model of training preachers

I work with Langham Preaching across East Asia. Langham Preaching was started about twenty years ago by John Stott and Christopher Wright. Along with Langham Partnership’s other ministries—Langham Literature and Langham Scholars—it seeks to equip leadership for the church in the Majority World. Langham Preaching’s mission is to provide training that builds indigenous movements of preachers, particularly focusing in areas where the church lacks resources, is under pressure, or is growing but lacks well-trained leaders—what are often called places of poverty, persecution, and potential. Across the world, this ministry takes place in about eighty nations.

A typical training programme is made up of three workshops lasting four to

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5. Training local facilitators

When training begins in a new location, it usually depends on outside facilitators and translation (often from English) into local languages. But the end goal is not just to train local preachers. Rather, it is to train people who are able to facilitate and indigenise the training for their own context. In most countries in East Asia, there are now local leaders who organise and facilitate preaching training with little or no support from outside the country. When this is done successfully, it leads to a number of positive outcomes: the seminars can be taught in local languages⁷ without the need for translation; costs are reduced as seminars are run using local facilities rather than people needing to travel to a central location; and the content of the training material can be modified to fit the cultural and educational background of the attendees. Langham Preaching gives local facilitators freedom to adapt their teaching content and methods for each different context. For example, within Indonesia, there are now two sets of training materials. One is used in urban areas amongst more educated attendees. The other is designed for rural areas where people have less education. The level of language, complexity of the material, and illustrations used are designed according to the needs of the learners.

A desire to grow

When Paul instructs Timothy to be devoted to teaching and preaching, he urges him to “Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim 4:15–16).

five days that are spread over a couple of years. The first workshop teaches the fundamentals, while the second and third look at how to preach from the different genres found in the New and Old Testaments. There is an increasing variety of ways in which this is done, be it online or hybrid training, a one-week intensive meeting over two weekends, or on four Saturdays. However, while the details of training vary according to context, they all include the following elements.

1. Training those who preach

The training is for those who already have a preaching ministry, not for seminary students. It can include pastors, lay leaders, student workers, children’s workers, etc. It is on-the-job training for those who already have some experience. It includes people ranging from eighteen to over seventy years of age, those who have preached for less than a year, and those who have been preaching for thirty years or more.

2. Non-academic

Apart from having a preaching ministry, the only prerequisite is the ability to read the Bible. Attendees come from vastly different educational backgrounds, with some not having completed high school, while others are seminary professors. Some have few or no Bible study tools in their own language. All the training is designed with this in mind. Those who have the resources and ability to use them are encouraged to do so. But the goal is that those who lack such tools gain confidence that they can still understand and teach God’s word in their own ministry context.

3. Practical training

The training involves teaching on how to study the Bible, how to plan a sermon,

how to apply and illustrate, etc. It also includes sessions on the character of the preacher and core convictions about preaching God’s word. But it does not aim to be comprehensive. The focus is on the core essential knowledge and skills needed to preach. During a training event, most of the time is spent practicing what is taught. This involves studying the Bible individually and in small groups, preparing sermon outlines, listening to sermons, and critiquing them. Practice and repetition of these steps is key.

4. Learning in community

Much of the learning time during workshops is set in the context of small groups where people see the benefits of discussion and learning from one another. Apart from the workshops, participants are expected to form local “preaching clubs” where they continue to meet regularly and practice what they have learned. For many pastors, these can become an important ongoing source of fellowship and encouragement. Involvement in a preaching club is one of the main indicators for improvement in preaching.



One of the joys of participating in Langham Preaching is meeting Asian preachers who exemplify this attitude. Many come to the training aware of their limitations but with a desire to grow. Their positive response to the training reveals that biblical preaching is not seen as an unnecessary or unwanted Western model of ministry, but as something needed and relevant for the church across East Asia.

Although the ministry was started by international facilitators, in most countries of East Asia, the bulk of the training is now led by local leaders who are keen to pass on what they have learned. The enthusiasm of the local church leaders to train others shows that they have seen the value of what they have learned for the churches in their context.

In one creative access nation, local facilitators have led forty five-day training seminars across the country for pastors and lay preachers over the last two years. Each seminar trains about twenty to thirty people. At the conclusion of one training event, the facilitators were asked if they could stay on for another week to provide a second week of training.

In the Philippines, over the last four years, training programmes have been started in four different regions, and many who have been trained have taken the material and are equipping others in their local churches and communities. This pattern of local initiative and enthusiasm is repeated in many places.

Langham Preaching is just one example of how preachers can be equipped. There are other organisations, some founded in Asia, that provide similar training. And most of this type of

Organisations that teach preaching

Langham Partnership.
Includes Langham Preaching.
<https://langham.org/>

Centre for Expository Preaching.
Based in Malaysia.
<https://cep.kvbctrust.org/>

Simeon Trust.
Based in the US but they also run training in other countries.
<https://simeontrust.org/>

Proclamation Trust.
Based in the UK but have international training, including in Asia.
<https://www.proctrust.org.uk/>

training can be done locally within churches, or church networks. Langham's vision is for a preaching movement, and in places where this has taken off, training is now often done at a local level, independent from any formal connection to Langham Preaching.

I mention this, not to boast in the work of Langham Preaching, but to illustrate the hunger that Asian pastors have to know God's word and to be better equipped to teach it to their churches. In fact, the Langham Preaching model of training is nothing special. It simply teaches and practices basic Bible study skills and models how to use what is found in the text as the foundation for all that is to be preached. It is built on a confidence that God's word is powerful and sufficient for God's church and that this word can be understood and taught

even in the absence of formal academic training or an abundance of study tools.

Testimonies

What is most encouraging is hearing the testimonies of those who have been through the training. A few consistent themes arise in these testimonies.

1. Participants are committed to spending even more time studying and preparing their messages. Some join the training looking for shortcuts, but usually the result is they are more willing to prioritise studying God's word for their ministry.
2. They report that their messages have stronger biblical foundations. But at the same time, they are more practical and helpful for the church. This is not just the opinion of the preachers themselves, but is reported by congregation members (and by the spouses of the preachers!).
3. Many participants take what they have learned and share it with others, either formally as Langham facilitators, or informally in their local networks. There is a desire to not just be good preachers but also to train others (as Paul prescribes in 2 Timothy 2:2).

Here are a few testimonies from East Asia:

"I have learned how to prepare sermon structures that clearly convey the message of the Word from the Bible. I understand the Word of God more deeply and freshly. I get sermon material from the Bible and do not depend on my own ideas."



Facilitator training



Examining the text structure

“I now model my sermon preparation on observation and making a sermon outline after finding the main idea from the Bible passage. I have joy and enthusiasm and want to preach it! Now my husband enjoys my sermons and even gives me praise. Before he always had a wrinkled forehead and a confused look! Praise the Lord, now his forehead is relaxed and a proud smile adorns his lips as the husband of the preacher.”

“The preaching training has greatly helped empower lay preachers in my church. There are currently thirty-one church leaders who can make their own sermons through preparation together in preaching clubs. In our preaching clubs, the preparation is done by those who will be preaching the following week. Many of them are fishermen who are out on other islands and come home at the end of the week. Then on Mondays they come with the results



of their observation of a text, and we make a sermon outline together. On Thursdays they come back to deliver their respective sermons. I give feedback to make sure they are faithful to the text, clear, and relevant. On Fridays I offer personal mentoring to those who need it. There is excitement almost every day when they come to my house and ask for corrections. They apologise for disturbing me. It makes me busier now, but later there will be more people who can preach.”

Preaching and our mission today

OMF’s vision statement is: “Through God’s grace, we aim to see an indigenous, biblical church movement in each people group of East Asia, evangelizing their own people and reaching out in mission to other peoples.”

Where does biblical preaching fit into this vision? Apart from evangelism and growing disciples, equipping local church leaders is essential to see this vision come to fruition. And the ability to preach and teach God’s word is a core responsibility of such leaders.

At the present time, I often see a greater interest in preaching amongst Asian pastors than amongst many in the missionary community. For most of us, a key factor in our own spiritual growth has been years of receiving faithful biblical teaching and preaching. We do the Asian church no favors when we neglect the importance of biblical preaching and the need to equip our brothers and sisters to be faithful in this task.

Praise God that missionaries have been key to the work of Langham across East Asia. In some cases, OMF colleagues have been the catalyst to

get the training started in a country. Others help play an important role as a cultural bridge between Langham and the local church leaders as they understand the language and church context. Some help to introduce or bring pastors to training events. Some help to lead preaching clubs.

Most of these missionary colleagues have other ministries as church planters, student workers, or in theological education. But they devote some of their time to encouraging the work of training pastors through their ministry connections.

Apart from Langham Preaching, OMF and CIM missionaries have been training preachers since the early days of the fellowship.⁸ This has been through teaching in seminaries and Bible schools, running training programmes, or simply walking alongside

local preachers and encouraging them. Within CIM/OMF, we have a long history of equipping biblical preachers.

Supporting and promoting good biblical preaching in the churches we serve is one key aspect of how we can help to build the church in East Asia. How can we continue to contribute to this?

Although we are not all preachers or directly involved in church planting, all of us work alongside Asian colleagues, attend churches, and have opportunities to influence our brothers and sisters. How can you encourage preachers you know to make the study and preaching of God’s word a priority in their ministry? How can you provide encouraging feedback on their preaching? Do you have resources that you can share with them? Can you support them to attend preaching training seminars or events? Do you set an example of how to teach and preach God’s word? Do you have opportunities to train or mentor preachers where you are serving?

May God continue to use us to equip Asian church leaders who can faithfully and effectively preach God’s word to God’s people for God’s glory. **MRT**

¹ Dwi Handayani, “The Formation of a Preacher Part 2: Confident in Conviction,” *Langham Publishing Blog*, 11 April 2021, <https://langhamliterature.org/blog/the-formation-of-a-preacher-part-2-confident-in-conviction> (accessed 28 May 2024).

² F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 131.

³ John T. Pless, “Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 51, nos. 2–3 (April–July 1987): 89–90, <https://ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/plesspreacherofthecross.pdf> (accessed 24 July 2024).

⁴ E. C. Dargan, *A History of Preaching, Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 366–67.

⁵ There is no space for a discussion of the relationship between preaching and teaching. I understand preaching to include elements of teaching, but it also involves the proclamation of the truth and exhortation for people to apply it to their lives. See 1 Timothy 4:13 where Paul links but also distinguishes these two aspects of ministry.

⁶ Pastor to Pastor Training Networks’ estimates of the exact figure vary widely. Eighty percent is a fairly conservative estimate, <https://www.p2pnetworks.org/the-need/>. The following Lausanne article places it at 95 percent: Ramesh Richard, “Training of Pastors: A High Priority for Global Ministry Strategy,” *Lausanne Global Analysis*, September 2015, <https://lausanne.org/global-analysis/training-of-pastors> (accessed 24 July 2024).

⁷ Initially, this is the national language, but over time training is also offered in regional and tribal languages when the resources are available.

⁸ See, for example, John Kuhn’s work teaching Lisu preachers in the short-term Bible schools, and Denis Lane and his Preach the Word training. Denis Lane, *Preach the Word* (Welwyn: Evangelical Press, 1986).

Project Ezra

Phil Nicholson



Phil Nicholson is from Australia and has been working with OMF in Taiwan since 1992. Previously he worked with university students and then as the Field Director for Taiwan. Since 2016 he has been seconded to serve with Langham Preaching as the East Asia Regional Coordinator. This involves organising and facilitating preaching training activities for Asian church leaders across the region and equipping local leaders to pass on what they have learned.

Who was Ezra? He was a priest sent back to Jerusalem from Babylon to support the rebuilding of the temple by teaching God's word to the returnees. He was described as someone who devoted his life to: (1) studying the Law of Moses; (2) obeying the Law; and (3) teaching the Law (Ezra 7:10).

Project Ezra is named after this Old Testament saint as this training course has similar aims for those who attend. We want to equip and encourage people to be devoted to understanding, obeying, and teaching the Scriptures to others. Project Ezra is one of the Training and Development Courses offered to OMF International members and friends.

Project Ezra aims to do three things:

1. It teaches simple, practical methods for studying the Bible and planning a Bible talk or discussion materials based on the biblical text. It follows a step-by-step approach that is easy to use for those without much previous training.
2. It challenges and reminds those who already have received training to maintain good Bible study habits. We can all become lazy or careless over time. For such people, Project Ezra can be a refresher course taking us back to basics. One recent attendee shared they just enjoyed spending time studying and discussing different Bible texts with colleagues each day. This is something many of us do not have opportunity to do regularly.



Project Ezra facilitator

But why is Project Ezra necessary?

Doesn't this teach basic ministry skills that we learn before joining the fellowship?

OMF members come from many different backgrounds and with a range of different skills and prior training. Some will already be experienced and competent in teaching God's word. Others will lack confidence or skills.

3. It provides a method that can easily be taught to others. The aim is that attendees are not only strengthened in their own preaching skills, but are also equipped to share these same steps with local believers and church leaders so that they can equip them in turn. This is something we encourage participants to do, and many attendees have worked through the training materials with local colleagues after attending.



Participants of a Project Ezra course in 2024

Although the focus of Project Ezra is on “preaching”, the methods taught are not just applicable for those who give sermons in a formal church setting. They are useful to anyone who has a teaching ministry, whether they give short talks in smaller fellowship groups, share from the Bible on Home Assignment, or lead Bible study discussions.

Is Project Ezra applicable in the East Asian Context?

Is there a danger that what is taught imports Western methods of thinking, teaching, and preaching?

Of course this is a danger for any form of training. However, the methods used in Project Ezra have been borrowed from Langham Preaching which has actively trained preachers across Asia for over ten years. These methods have been adopted and adapted with great enthusiasm by Asian church leaders in most of the countries where OMF is serving. And within the Project Ezra Course, we spend time discussing issues of contextualisation and how to be relevant in our different contexts.

The training provided by Project Ezra is not something new, but it is simply a way to make this accessible to our members in languages we are comfortable using. Currently, Project Ezra is offered in English and Mandarin, but it could be adapted for other languages if there is sufficient interest.

How does Project Ezra work?

What does the training look like?

Currently, Project Ezra is run as a four- to five-day in-person course.

The mornings primarily provide input from the facilitators who teach the steps of moving from studying God’s word to preparing teaching material based on what is learned. Each afternoon covers five steps:

- (1) Personal study of an assigned text;
- (2) Small group discussion of the text, planning the message, and sermon outline;
- (3) Groups share their work and critique one another;
- (4) One of the facilitators presents a sermon based on this same text, seeking to model what has been taught;
- (5) Feedback on the sermon from the learners.

Although the focus of Project Ezra is on “preaching”, the methods taught are not just applicable for those who give sermons in a formal church setting. They are useful to anyone who has a teaching ministry...

The emphasis is on practice and repetition so that one grows in understanding and confidence in the methods taught. During the week, each participant will also prepare a short message, preach this on the final day, and receive feedback.

Project Ezra can be taken as a standalone one-week course, but it can also be offered as Project Ezra 2 and 3. These will use the same format but will focus on how to teach different genres across the Bible and will build on some of the other basic skills taught in the foundational course, such as developing effective applications, developing presentation skills, overcoming challenges preachers face, etc.

The next Project Ezra courses will be offered in English and Chinese in 2025. Dates have not yet been set, but will be posted on the EA Learning website, or you can find details from your centre’s Training & Development Coordinator. **MRT**



Visual report by a group

Preaching to Oral Audiences

Larry Dinkins



Dr. Larry Dinkins finished his ThM at Dallas Theological Seminary in 1979 and then went with his wife Paula to Thailand through OMF International and began a church planting ministry with leprosy patients. In 1987, the Dinkins transitioned into a Bible teaching ministry at the Bangkok Bible College. In 1995, Larry finished classwork for a PhD at Biola University, allowing him to return to Thailand to start a TEE program in North Thailand. Larry acted as a founding director of the newly formed Chiang Mai Theological Seminary (CTS) in 2000 before the family evacuated Thailand in 2002 due to a diagnosis of cancer in Paula's bone marrow. After nine years of treatment, Paula's struggle with cancer ended and she went into the Lord's presence. Larry returned to Thailand in 2012 to resume his ministry of Bible teaching at CTS. Larry is the coordinator for both Walk Thru the Bible and Simply the Story in Thailand.

Mr. Itch was struggling. He had tried to follow the instructions for developing an exegetical sermon from the Epistles but as a leprosy patient with a fourth-grade education, the learning curve was just too steep. As Itch's mentor, I breathed a sigh of relief along with the Thai congregation when he finished his homily with a heart-felt prayer. A brand-new missionary at the time, I wondered, "Surely there is a better way to train Mr. Itch as a preacher to his people."

The main teaching tool of OMF in Central Thailand was a TEE program called Home Bible Seminary (HBS). I thought it odd that they chose "Seminary" for the instruction since few of the students had finished even high school. A senior co-worker instructed me to act as a mentor for Mr. Hit (the Thai miss-pronounced "Itch") and teach him how to mark his Bible to a grammatical level of subject, verb, and object and then transfer his analysis to what ended up being sixty-six workbooks (one for every book in the Bible). Mr. Hit would sometimes labor over a paragraph in the Bible and then instead of transferring a critically analyzed summary to the workbook, would often simply record the verse references.

Once a month we would bring all the mentees together to train as a group

on topics such as discipleship, church planting, and crafting sermons. For this training, we brought in a pastor from England who trained them in exegesis of the text as well as constructing an outlined sermon. When I asked the leader of HBS about such a Western approach, he replied, "Larry, we are using the cutting edge of a new trend in distance learning called TEE—Theological Education by Extension." Like the HBS leader, I too desired that all of our TEE students could develop in literate processing of the Scriptures with a view to becoming solid exegetes of God's word, but the reality was that most would remain at their core oral learners. At that time, I was a junior worker and had no answer for my very senior co-worker. However, more than four decades further on in Thai ministry, I can now give a much more informed answer, having seen clearly how hard-wired for stories the Thai actually are.

Journey into orality

My journey into orality began with the qualitative research I did for my PhD at Biola University.¹ By that time, I had labored among the Thai for twelve years and became acutely aware that my target group had only reached 0.3 percent Christian after 150-plus years of missionary work, a figure that had only gone up to 0.65 percent by 2022.²



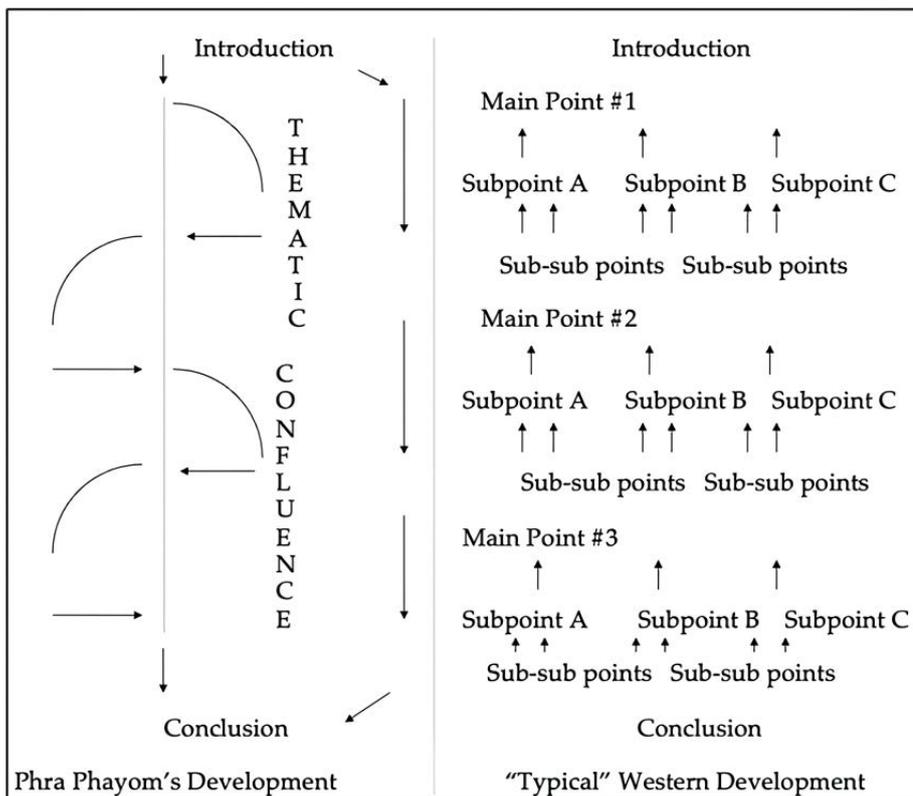


Fig. 2 Comparison of Development Structure

I felt that the traditional Western and literate approach to communication in Thailand was a factor in these statistics, but I needed to do research to confirm it.

After doing qualitative research on the Walk Thru the Bible method and field-testing it over a period of seven years in all four regions of Thailand, I was able to confirm that the Thai were indeed preferred oral learners who resonated with a concrete relational approach based on the narrative sections of Scripture. Like Mr. Hit, the Thai were often semi-literate at best and had trouble following a literate treatment of outlined points presented in expository sermons. Kirk Person highlighted this disconnect through a comparison of Dr. W. A. Criswell's sermons and that of a popular Thai monk, Phra (monk) Phayom (see Figure 2).³ Criswell followed the logical structure of a classical expository sermon outline, while Phra Phayom used a thematic and free-flowing construction which included culturally relevant stories along a theme expanded and restated until culminating in a moral challenge to action.

A telling aspect of Person's analysis is that when a message is broken down, analyzed, and put into an outline form, you end up with a 29 percent retention rate. But since 60 percent of Phra Phayom's messages were made up of stories, the end result was a

surprising 75–80 percent retention rate. The relevance of Person's analysis is a recognition that Thai learning and preaching styles should be matched as closely as possible. Phra Phayom's instinctive feel for the preferences of his Thai oral listeners to a more thematic and narrative-driven approach communicated at both a head and heart level. This basic law of education is one that my professor in seminary, Dr. Howard Hendricks, taught us often, "The way people learn determines how you teach."⁴

Five days of Simply the Story training hugely challenged my preconceptions about how to best communicate with my oral target group using a less familiar genre—narrative.

My doctoral studies introduced me to the validity of oral communication, but my stress was on the metanarrative portrayed in the chronological treatment used by Walk Thru the Bible. I had yet to see a method that effectively used the individual stories of the Bible to communicate in a truly oral way. The answer came through an invitation to attend a Simply the Story (STS) workshop in Hemet, California. Hemet is the headquarters of both STS and

The God's Story Project (GS). GS is an eighty-minute video presentation from Creation to Eternity and has been translated into 459 languages.⁵ My initial shock during the STS training was entering into an "oral zone" in which notebooks and pencils were forbidden. Another shocking reminder was just how prevalent narrative is in the Bible. Tom Steffen asserts that at least 55–65 percent of the Bible is narrative while only 10 percent is propositional.⁶ Within that 55–65 percent are around 1,000 stories, which shows that God purposely chose narrative as the main medium to present his redemptive message. I also discovered that 70 percent of the world either cannot read or prefer to communicate using oral methods.⁷

Coming into this week-long seminar, my preferred approach to sermon preparation, and the one I had used since seminary, was an analytical, systematic, and sequential outlining of the Bible, no matter what the genre dictated. My preferred genre, of course, was the Epistles and other doctrinal sections. The motto of Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS) is "Preach the Word" (2 Tim 4:2), and I had benefitted from that mantra throughout my ministry and continue to do so to this day. However, five days of STS training hugely challenged my preconceptions about how to best communicate with my oral target group using a less familiar genre—narrative. After being steeped in the principles of STS, participants were encouraged to present a narrative message to the group and be evaluated with a view to

receiving a certificate. The Thai who invited me to the training had received their certificates and so I was confident that I could acquire mine as well.

I had flown through many academic workshops and thought this would be no different. At the end of my talk, a Thai participant asked the evaluator if I had passed. Her response was, "I'm afraid Dr. Dinkins didn't pass. He violated too many of the basic principles

of telling a Bible story.” At this point, I actually became angry. The evaluator had the audacity to flunk the “Right Reverend Doctor Larry M. Dinkins!” I returned home to inform my wife of this perceived injustice and how I had “lost face” in front of the Thai. She replied, “That is the first academic assignment you have failed to pass since I have known you. Actually, it’s good that you flunked. You needed to be humbled. I suggest that you study this topic more since you don’t seem to understand it.” That challenge sent me on a quest to understand how best to communicate to preferred oral learners. That pursuit also resulted in helping to facilitate around one hundred STS workshops in ten countries as well as teaching a master’s level orality course ten times in various seminaries. Thus, I have had the opportunity at the local church level, in academic environments, and in personal ministry to test out practically many of the principles of oral communication and preaching recorded in this article.

The bulk of STS training takes place in small groups where a story is prepared through inductive Bible study, oral style. Then a volunteer presents the story to another small group following specific steps. Although STS lends itself best to small group interaction, I have adapted this approach to work with larger church groups when called upon to preach.

Three Approaches to Oral Story Preaching

1. Full Oral Model⁸

a. Introduce the story.

It is usually helpful to choose a story that is less than fifteen verses long and that has a significant amount of action, reflecting a plot structure that builds to a climax and then finishes with a resolution.⁹ The story should be examined in its context noting how the setting, plot, and structure influence characters. The introduction itself should be brief and is used to orient the listener to where the story falls in the broader context as well as highlight anything that needs clarification. Special stress should be given to any unfamiliar terms or information that will help the listener understand the content of the story. During the introduction, a print Bible should be held closed in the preacher’s hands to indicate that what is being shared is related to the

Although Simply the Story lends itself best to small group interaction, I have adapted this approach to work with larger church groups when called upon to preach.

story, but is not the story itself. Ask the congregation to refrain from looking at the text for the duration of the sermon so that they can focus on the orally-told story and retain it better.

b. Tell the story.

The actual story begins when you open the Bible and begin with “Now this is a story from God’s word . . .” Tell the story with culturally appropriate actions and expressions that reflect the passion and drama of the story. At this point, I often descend from the pulpit and draw closer to the congregation. The story should be internalized to the point that it can be given in your own words but in a content-accurate manner. A few of the pronouns used in the prose text will need to be changed to proper names for clarity’s sake. After a sentence or two, lay the open Bible down as you tell the story, but at the end of the story you should close the Bible, showing the sacred story is finished.

c. Retell the story.

Ask a volunteer to retell the story as best they can for the whole group. Give the volunteer the first sentence of the story so they will start properly. Be sure to affirm his or her efforts when they finish. An alternate method is to have the congregation find a partner to share the story with. In this way, everyone is able to participate in the story.

d. Step through the story.

Before asking Socratic questions of the congregation concerning the story, it is necessary for your listeners to hear the story told accurately at least two times. This time the preacher tells the story leaving blanks for the congregation to fill in. He may also choose to let his listeners complete a thought or phrase as he reviews the story from the beginning to end. It is helpful to insert a word or phrase that is “opposite” or contrary to what is actually found in the story in order to make sure they are listening well. (Be

sure to only use one such “opposite” so as to not overly confuse your listeners).

e. Find the spiritual treasures.

Retell a short portion starting at the beginning of the story so the participant will know where to focus. The goal is to design questions that help the listener discover biblical truth for themselves. These questions highlight how God is working behind the scenes in peoples lives.

Our stress is on “what” happened, more than “why” it happened. Why questions tend to result in too much speculation. In smaller congregations, questions posed by the preacher and answers given can be easily heard. In larger congregations, I have had ushers take microphones into the congregation so that responses can be heard by all. The ushers should not relinquish the microphone in order to control the question-answer process.

During this step, participants gain insight into the character and actions of both God and the characters involved. It is helpful to start with a situational question that will help the listeners identify with the character(s). For the story in Mark 4 that tells of the paralytic, one could ask, “How might the paralyzed man have felt as he was being let down from the roof?” For this character-centric question, have the participants pair up and share their thoughts.

Next, you can ask the entire congregation a question related to what various characters do or say? Then ask yourself: What can we learn spiritually from what the character(s) do or say? You can also ask what key choice(s) characters made in the story, but also be sure to ask what we can learn from the other choices/ options that could have been made.

The next set of questions emphasizes the results of the choices that central characters made and the impact those choices might have had on others. There are a number of observational

questions that can be asked but the ones above are easy to remember and are helpful in unpacking the key principles and lessons within the story. Be sure to ask what we can learn about the person and attributes/actions of God from his interaction with characters and their interaction with each other. By telling the story from the beginning in sections and applying these observational questions to the story, the listener is now prepared to make applications from the story to their daily lives.

f. Spiritual applications.

In the previous step, the emphasis is on how God is working in the lives of people in the biblical story. In the next step, the goal is to discover the spiritual truths that apply to our lives and ministry today. As the preacher asked observational questions regarding the story and the congregation answered them, various spiritual principles and lessons surfaced. The pastor should remind his listeners of a principle or lesson by saying something like the following: “In this part of the story, we learned that the four men who carried the paralytic were acting as a team. Today do we see such teamwork in the church or in our family, work, school, etc.?” The congregation will respond positively, which allows the pastor to ask, “Have you or someone you know experienced such teamwork?” The pastor can acknowledge those that respond and allow them to share a personal testimony. Usually there is time for people to respond to three or four such applications. To end, it is helpful to ask, “Is there any other applications from this story that might help you in the future?” Finally, the preacher should end with a closing prayer.¹⁰

2. Rhetorical Question Model

The full model is different enough from a typical western style sermon that your congregation may not be prepared to use it at first. In such cases, I suggest that you follow the first four steps above. But if your group is overly skeptical, you can read the story before telling it orally. Alternatively, instead of having to vocalize the story to a neighbor, a preacher could have the congregation tell the story silently in their head. When it comes to asking questions of the congregation, the preacher should simply ask observational questions, pause, and then answer them himself. By this method, the church has at least a



chance to reflect on the type of answer they might have offered. After going through the story from the beginning using such rhetorical questions, the preacher can then begin to expand on areas of application from the story.

3. Half-and-half Model

Many preachers have a clear paradigm for their literate-style preaching and have never asked questions from the pulpit expecting direct responses from their congregation. I was asked as a guest

There is no one preaching method that is best in all contexts, so the preferable approach is the one that both fits the target group while honoring the Scriptures.

preacher to give an oral style sermon, but when the pastor realized I would be asking questions of his congregation, he forbade me from doing so. This pastor was very afraid of the potential “messiness” of such a practice. In that case, I reverted to following the first four steps above but then simply “preached” a narrative style sermon in a way I knew the pastor would approve. At a minimum, the congregation was able to participate and engage in the story orally by following the first four steps, while not being shocked by the perceived “messiness” of the last two steps. Probably the easiest way to make

a less jarring transition to oral preaching is to start with the Half-and-Half Model, move to the Rhetorical-Questions Model, and, as the congregation increasingly engages God’s word in an oral fashion, experiment with the Full-Oral Model.

I am under no illusion that the suggestions above will come easy to pastors and congregations that have a clear paradigm and expectations about what a “proper” sermon should look and sound like. STS was birthed within a small-group context and moving it into the sermon arena is more apt to work in smaller churches, but less so in large bodies of believers. Established churches often have a long-standing standard format (as opposed to church plants or house churches) and thus there may be much hesitation about veering away from the norm. Other churches might be willing to accept an occasional oral sermon on a Sunday but not as regular fare. Still others will think of a story approach as suitable for children, but not for adults. Understandably, a typical sermon fits a comfortable lecture mode and so the idea of allowing the congregation to answer questions aloud is perceived as just too “messy”. For all of these reasons, it is advisable to propose some incremental models that include more narrative treatments in order to

ease a group into a more oral style, rather than introducing it “full bore”. There is no one preaching method that is best in all contexts, so the preferable approach is the one that both fits the target group while honoring the Scriptures. One thing is for certain, you will never know the potential or advantages of a more narrative/oral approach unless you try.

Difficult paradigm shift

Once sailing in a small skiff, I saw how easy it was to make sharp turns as we tacked into the wind. However, a naval battleship needs several

minutes to change directions. Making a major paradigm shift into a more oral approach to communicating will not occur in minutes or days, but will more likely require a period of years. One of my DTS ThM students, Mick Zobel, expressed a similar feeling after taking one of my orality classes:

Your class was unlike any other class I've taken at DTS. I've never been told not to take notes in any class. Initially it freaked me out, but it was one of the most beneficial and eye-opening experiences I've ever had. At my program at DTS we are taught to read Koine Greek and Classical Hebrew. I know the Bible inside and out and I can tell you the story of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. But when you asked us to share just one story with 100% content accuracy, I didn't think I could do it. I was convicted and sat there. I could have summarized a story but I wouldn't be able to tell it accurately and I am a fifth-year student!¹¹

I totally understand Mick's sentiments, because in 2006, before my exposure to STS, I could not have told you one of the 1,000 stories recorded in the Bible in an accurate manner. I could have summarized a number of them, and if you had given me a chance to thoroughly review a story, then I could have told it adequately. Due to my previous training, I could have expounded most any Bible narrative, but I could not have told it in an oral manner.

My norm when preaching was no different than that of my peers in that I was used to preparing extensive outlined notes, interspersing illustrations and cross-references into the outline and applying the text at intervals during the sermon or tacking a few applications on

My experience is that when an oral person becomes excited about biblical narratives, they often show a desire to learn more stories. At that point, they realize that literacy is a means to gain access to more of God's word and their interest in reading and biblical education is heightened.

at the end. I used this basic approach with a few variations for most all the genres of the Bible. The difference now is that I continue to use my time-tested expositional method but reserve it primarily for the didactic and epistolary parts of Scripture. For the narrative sections, I have accumulated a database of over one hundred stories that I have used not just in preaching situations but also leading small group Bible studies, counseling opportunities, and in evangelistic encounters.¹² I also draw upon a list of 296 stories compiled by STS that are the basis for their Oral Bible Schools which are presently being taught around the world.¹³ Through experience with these stories, I am able to list eleven advantages related specifically to oral preaching that I believe will at least nudge preachers towards more story-oriented sermons.

Advantages of story sermons with preferred oral learners

1. Holistic engagement.

If I was restricted to one short description of my goal in preaching in the West or especially in Thailand, it would be making a direct connection with my congregation through engagement with the listener. I want them to connect with God through his word and with me as his messenger.

R. C. Sproul is an unusually systematic and propositional pulpiteer, yet he sees the value of engagement through narratives, "I'm big on preaching from the narratives because people will listen ten times as hard to a story as they will to an abstract lesson."¹⁴ Beginning with a Bible story and then stepping down from the pulpit to maintain constant eye contact creates an engaging environment with my congregation. Using open-ended questions in a "give and take" dialogue further adds to that connection. As Joseph Webb asserts, "Getting rid of notes heightens the possibility that a real conversation about God's truth will take place."¹⁵

2. Eye contact and body language.

Being freed up from notes or a manuscript means that one can keep uninterrupted eye contact. Far too often I have listened to sermons that felt like seminary lectures in which the preacher either basically read from a manuscript or at critical junctures diverted his eyes to make sure to read a key phrase or quote properly. My homiletics professor, Haddon Robinson, ranks eye contact as "the single most effective means of nonverbal communication ... because eye contact can hold the audience's attention effectively."¹⁶ Robinson also referred to a study that determined that



7 percent of a sermon's effectiveness was due to content, and the other 93 percent was due to body language factors.¹⁷

3. Personal discovery.

I have been hugely blessed by expositors who have discovered deep truths from a biblical text and effectively communicated the meat of God's word to the congregation. However, little room is left for the congregation to discover truth for themselves. Asking insightful Socratic questions gives laity who often lack academic advantages an opportunity to experience discovery-learning as God reveals deep truths through his Spirit. I've also seen critical thinking and analytic skills improve as a congregation digs into a Bible story and is given a chance to interact personally with the events and characters in the story.

4. Replication.

As a church member leaves the service, I want to know that they have not only grasped the meaning of the text covered and are ready to apply the lessons learned in their lives, but also have absorbed the sermon so that they can share it with others. Unfortunately, I've found that many preachers as they exit the pulpit would be hard pressed to recite all the points of their sermon without referring back to their notes. I have not sensed that there is any real expectation that the congregation would



I've never forgotten a mantra that a mission teacher repeated often: "Don't teach anything that is not immediately replicable." This admonition is applicable in the West, but especially relevant on the mission field where the multiplication of disciples using readily conveyable training approaches is vital to the expansion of the church.

5. Improved literacy.

My experience is that when an oral person becomes excited about biblical narratives, they often show a desire to learn more stories. At that point, they realize that literacy is a means to gain access to more of God's word and their interest in reading and biblical education is heightened.

sections even in poetical and epistolary literature. In STS training, we give examples from the Epistles, like James 1:22-25, as well as Psalms 1 and 23. The Major and Minor Prophets are full of images, parables, acted out signs, and short story lines that can be orally told and dramatized.

7. Reflects the Jesus model.

Jesus was the consummate oral storyteller of all history and the ultimate model of a contextualized methodology in which he carefully selected stories that fit a culturally-relevant parabolic form familiar to his listeners. Matthew noted that, "Jesus spoke all these things in parables to the crowds; he did not speak to them without a parable" (Matt 13:34 NET). Jesus used stories and parables with both the common people and also with the most highly educated scribes and Pharisees. As a rabbi, Jesus was particularly adept at asking questions. He was frequently asked all kinds of questions but most often chose to answer them obliquely by using a parable, a story, another question, or simply not answering the question at all. The benefit of using stories and unpacking them with dialogue and discussion through questions serves as a reminder that you are using a proven method that the master teacher used extensively.

8. Provides a database of sermons.

On more than one occasion, I have been asked to give a sermon without any prior notice. Once I told my host the topic I planned to preach on and she informed me that the congregation had already heard that sermon through a video that had been prepared for the

Asking insightful Socratic questions gives laity who often lack academic advantages an opportunity to experience discovery-learning as God reveals deep truths through his Spirit. I've seen critical thinking and analytic skills improve as a congregation digs into a Bible story and is given a chance to interact personally with the events and characters.

share what they learned with others. A key feature of a narrative sermon is to package it in such a way that everyone can repeat the story during the following week and be able to report on the responses they received the next Sunday. This fits with Paul's admonition to Timothy to pass down what he has learned generationally (2 Tim 2:2).

6. Other Scripture genres can be oralized.

Each genre should be honored and treated in a manner that fits that genre. If an epistolary section is heavy with propositional doctrine, then it should be treated in a more didactic manner. However, there are "narrative-like"

denomination some months before. I did not have my computer with me and needed to preach in the next few minutes. Fortunately, I was able to quickly review a story from my database of Bible narratives and entered the pulpit without undue anxiety.

9. Matches teaching with learning style.

Of the over 8 billion people in the world today, 5.7 billion are oral-preference learners who depend on aural, or oral-visual means to receive, process, remember, and pass on information. About 70–80 percent of the world does not depend on textual transmission and, of these, more than half are among the unreached. There are around two thousand predominantly oral unengaged, unreached people groups that do not have a single verse of Scripture in their heart language.¹⁸ Oral learners are hard-wired for stories and resonate with a narrative sermon that unpacks the life-and-blood experiences of Bible characters that often mirror their own joys and struggles and as a result allow them to deeply identify with those characters. Thus, desired doctrinal and theological truths that are embedded in the stories are absorbed effectively by the listeners in a form that fits their preferred learning style.

10. Gives immediate feedback.

When a typical message is finished in a church context, the speaker has no idea of how the people processed or understood the material. The nature of story telling means that as you unpack the story and ask open-ended questions, you get immediate feedback. You can promptly tell whether the group is tracking with the story or are confused. With their relation-based culture, the Thai appreciate the chance for such group participation and interaction. Be aware, however, that in a honor-shame culture, it may take a while for people to feel safe enough to share, especially if the only style they have had in the past was a lecture approach.

One needs an oral skill set to handle a group in this way and it may seem “messy” at times. Even so, adult learners appreciate and respond best when they sense their opinion is heard and valued.

11. Small group discipleship.

Looking back at my spiritual journey, God’s word expounded from the pulpit combined with a strong discipleship group were the two most transformational factors in my early Christian life. As impactful as the preaching hour on Sundays was in my



life, the weight of my growth came from the small groups that I met with during the week. I find this to be a common experience among most believers I have met. The focus of this article is on how oral sermons can be used effectively in formal preaching times, but the main thrust of each oral workshop I have been involved in has been on small-group dynamics. Preparing a Bible story and helping participants retell the story accurately takes place best in a small group and allows each participant to make more pointed personal applications to life. Avery Willis believed strongly in

preaching and taught it in seminary as one means of discipleship. Yet preaching is not the only means, an assertion Willis highlights when he states:

You don’t make disciples through preaching. Trying to make disciples through preaching is like spraying milk over a nursery full of screaming babies just hoping some of it falls into their mouths. That is about all you are doing when you are preaching. You make disciples as Jesus did—in face-to-face relationships in small groups.¹⁹

Thus, the starting point for introducing oral story telling in a church should begin at the small group level. When people see the spiritual benefits at a personal level it will be much easier to introduce a more oral method in the pulpit.

While highlighting certain advantages of an oral method, it is important to affirm the strengths of a more literate approach. Tom Steffen has sought to compare and contrast an oral and textual emphasis through Table 1.²⁰ Steffen uses a continuum to analyze the respective values held by each. He recognizes the strengths of each and affirms a grammatical-textural hermeneutic. Each should be used in a complementary fashion, yet when dealing with narrative genre, one must honor and employ a more oral hermeneutic and delivery system.

Dissecting the butterfly

One of the most impactful apologetics for oral preaching I have ever heard came from a story trainer explaining the dissection of a butterfly. After grabbing an imaginary butterfly from the air, the trainer began to symbolically tear off the wings, antenna, and legs and put them into neat piles. He then asked, “Isn’t my butterfly beautiful?” The trainees were appalled and said, “Yes, the parts are in neat piles, but the butterfly is dead!” The beauty of a butterfly is when all the parts function

Oral Emphasis	Textual Emphasis
Bible discussions	Bible studies
Keeping the Story Whole	Fragmenting the Text
Heart Hermeneutic	Head Hermeneutic
Character-historical	Grammatical-historical
Character-centric meaning	Text-centric meaning
Relational	Rational
Stories central	Stories illustrate
Character-centric questions	Text-centric questions
Narrative logic	Propositional logic
Relational theology	Abstract theology
Big character	“Big idea”

Table 1 Comparing Oral and Textual Emphasis

as a whole. The beauty of a Bible story occurs when the “life” of the story is preserved by telling it in its entirety and allowing the congregation to repeat it. After everyone has absorbed the story, then one can help them unpack the story and apply it through questions. The problem is, a typical sermon on a narrative passage breaks the story into various points. The first part is explicated and then an application is suggested. The rest of the story is treated in a similar way as the respective parts of the story are analyzed sequentially and applied to the present day. The congregation must move cognitively from Bible times to the present day in rapid succession.

A pastor working with international students in the US attended an STS workshop and made this observation of this dissection process:

The difference between this STS approach and a more literate approach is that with the former we treat the Bible less as a book to be deciphered and dissected, and more as a record of events lived out in the framework of historical reality. In this STS framework, we begin to see events as live, with undercurrent

of parallel realities (such as the emotions of the people involved, the spiritual connections, etc.) to be discovered along the way.²¹

The type of dissection this pastor refers to is suitable for didactic and epistolary genres, but narrative needs the unity of the pericope to be preserved. Sidney Greidanus summarizes this dissection process, “A little too much ‘preaching’ quickly destroys the inherent force of the narrative.”²² Joseph Webb adds that

I have heard many a sermon from narrative texts that reported on the story rather than telling the story. Like an autopsy on a dead body, the preacher gives a technical theological analysis of the story. But narrative texts are best preached with the telling of the story along with theological interpretation and application.²³

J. O. Terry, a pioneer in orality within International Mission Board circles, passed on to me a comical illustration that he shared often with fellow missionaries using not butterflies, but eggs.²⁴

You go to the market to buy some eggs. You tell the clerk that you’d like a dozen eggs. The clerk brings your eggs to the counter. You are expecting him to put the eggs in a bag or container so you can take them home. But surprisingly the clerk cracks open each egg and spills its contents on the counter! When he has finished cracking all the eggs he says, “I hope you enjoy your eggs and feel free to share them with your friends.” What obviously was needed was a suitable container for the eggs. Each sermon needs an appropriate container depending on the genre you are preaching and the audience you are addressing. The sermons that I have remembered over my lifetime are sermons that are containers for the eggs of truth. The ones I remember best have been contained within a whole story sermon.

Butterflies and eggs are fragile items and so it is important to handle both carefully by preserving the life of butterflies and by placing eggs in a proper container. With narrative sermons, the unity of the story needs to be preserved and then packaged in such a way that they can be enjoyed by the listener and then repackaged to share with others.

Hammers and tweezers

A good carpenter does not arrive at the job site with only a hammer in his hand. I arrived in Thailand fresh out of seminary with a number of tools, but the main one was a literate/Western mallet that I used in all my preaching, seminary teaching, and local church training. My oral/story communication skill, however, was the size of a pair of tweezers. I noticed that my fellow cross-cultural workers were carrying their tweezers as well, since they had been trained in a manner similar to myself. I still carry my hammer and continue to pass the same hammer

Oral learners are hard-wired for stories and resonate with a narrative sermon that unpacks the life-and-blood experiences of Bible characters that often mirror their own joys and struggles and as a result allow them to deeply identify with those characters. Thus, desired doctrinal and theological truths that are embedded in the stories are absorbed effectively by the listeners in a form that fits their preferred learning style.

Now I see my calling is to teach not just content, but teach people, and oral-preference people at that. To teach our present generation, we need: (1) a variety of tools in our communication belt, (2) the knowledge of what tool to use for what type of learner, and (3) skill plus diligence in using those tools.

along to the Thai so they will know how to wield a propositional tool for the expository messages they give. But when treating the narrative portions that make up the bulk of the Bible, I pack an oral tool and want to make sure the Thai own one as well. With my literate hammer in hand, I used to make sure people mastered certain subjects and topics in a lettered way. Now I see my calling is to teach not just content, but teach people, and oral-preference people at that. To teach our present generation, we need: (1) a variety of tools in our communication belt,²⁵ (2) the knowledge of what tool to use for what type of learner; and (3) skill plus diligence in using those tools. The communicator who possesses such a homiletic tool chest of approaches will be well prepared when called upon to teach “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).

Vic Anderson studied the homiletic tool chest of Ethiopian preachers and in the conclusion to his dissertation, he added implications from his research to our postmodern culture:

When is a sermon a really good sermon in the western postmodern culture? Does a sermon need to be expositional to be effective? If so, does exposition need to look like traditional exposition? Perhaps homileticians must learn to expose the meaning of the text without the audience feeling like they have reasoned their way through a carefully prepared exposition. Perhaps standards for sermon outlines must be adjusted so that rigors of logic are not applied so rigorously.²⁶

Anderson’s challenge, it seems, is how to affirm “traditional exposition” while being flexible enough to apply

its strengths in a culturally sensitive manner to this age of modernity.

Conclusion

Walter Ong, who some claim coined the word “orality”, famously acknowledged the steep learning curve that many highly literate ministers face as they try to relate to preferred oral learners: “We—readers of books such as this—are so literate that it is very difficult for us to conceive of an oral universe of communication or thought except as a variant of a literate universe.”²⁷ The classic confession in this same vein must be the statement by the editor of the journal *Missiology*, J. Nelson Jennings, who had to collate articles on the topic of orality for the journal in 2010: “As a wirelessly connected and lettered human being living in 2010, I find it next to impossible even to conceive of—much less interact with—those people living in 2010 who are embedded in oral societies.”²⁸ We are now in the year 2024 and the challenge of reaching both primary and secondarily oral learners has only increased over the years. David McClellan’s questions are questions that I ask myself often and leave as a final challenge to us all:

What would it look like if orality was allowed to permeate the homiletic air? What if in preparation and delivery, sermons were to take on the not-insignificant advantages of oral construction and thought patterns?²⁹ **MRT**

¹ Larry Dinkins, “Adaptation of Walk Thru the Bible Pedagogical Method to Thai Audience” (PhD dissertation, Biola University, 2000).

² “Thailand People Groups, Languages, and Religions,” Joshua Project, <https://joshuaproject.net/countries/TH> (accessed 15 September 2022).

³ Kirk R. Person, “Preaching in the Shade of the Bo Tree: A Comparison of Thai Buddhist and American Evangelical Expository Technique” (MAM thesis, Southwestern Baptist Theological

Seminary, 1994), 38–50.

⁴ Howard G. Hendricks, *Teaching to Change Lives* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1987), 15.

⁵ See <http://oralbiblesources.com/shopcart/>.

⁶ Tom Steffen, “My Reluctant Journey into Orality.” Address at the Fourth Conference on Reaching Oral Communicators, Anaheim California, 13 July 2005.

⁷ Avery Willis, “Following Jesus Making Disciples of Primary Oral Learners,” audio CD (Laguna Hills, CA: Progressive Vision, 2003), cited in Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, “Making Disciples of Oral Learners,” Lausanne Occasional Paper no. 54, 2005, <https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/making-disciples-oral-learners-lop-54> (accessed 18 August 2024).

⁸ See www.simplythistory.org (for download of full STS handbook).

⁹ A list of 296 optimum stories can be found at Oral Bible School 296 Stories, <https://oralstoryteller.org> (accessed 5 September 2024).

¹⁰ For full treatment of this STS model using the story of Namaan in 2 Samuel 5 and the Widow and Oil story in 2 Samuel 4, see Tom Steffen and Bill Bjoraker, *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020).

¹¹ Heart Pocket, “HPP0202 DTS Student Overcomes His Fear,” Heart Pocket Podcast, 23 August 2022, <https://heartpocket.libsyn.com/hpp0202-dts-student-overcomes-his-fear> (accessed 18 August 2024).

¹² 105 Old and New Testament Stories, <https://biblestoryteller.org> (accessed on 12 August 2024).

¹³ Oral Bible School 296 Stories, <https://oralstoryteller.org> (accessed 5 September 2024).

¹⁴ Steven Matthewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 20.

¹⁵ Joseph M. Webb, *Preaching Without Notes* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001), 11.

¹⁶ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Message*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 211–12.

¹⁷ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 193.

¹⁸ Lausanne Movement, “Orality: An Infographic,” 4 December 2018, <https://www.lausanne.org/content/orality-an-infograph> (accessed 19 August 2024).

¹⁹ Avery Willis and Mark Snowden, *Truth that Sticks: How to Communicate Velcro Truth in a Teflon World* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2010), 87.

²⁰ Steffen and Bjoraker, *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics*, 18.

²¹ Dorothy Miller, *STS Handbook: Exploring Scripture Through Discussion, Listening and Responding*, Ed. 6 (Hemet, CA: The God’s Story Project, 2022), 98.

²² Sidney Greidanus, *Preacher and Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 153.

²³ Webb, *Preaching Without Notes*, 153.

²⁴ Personal correspondence with J. O. Terry, 17 August 2024.

²⁵ In today’s cybernated age, there is an increasing need for communicators to master digital approaches.

²⁶ Vic Anderson, “Implicit Rhetorical Theory of Preachers in Wolaitta Ethiopia with Implications for Holiletics Instruction in Theological Education” (PhD dissertation, Biola University, 2008), 305.

²⁷ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1991).

²⁸ Jennings J. Nelson, “Editor’s Notes,” *Missiology: An International Review* 38, no. 2 (April 2010): 107.

²⁹ Dave McClellan, “Recovering a Sense of Orality in Homiletics,” *Evangelical Homiletics Society* 6, no. 1 (March 2006): 11.

Sound Preaching and Ears that Hear

Tina Keller



Tina is currently serving in OMF as the International Coordinator for Evangelization. Tina and Nathan Keller and their three teenage boys, Timothy, Gabriel, and Jonathan, have been based in Taiwan for over fourteen years. Sent through OMF (US), the family started serving with a church planting team in Taiwan to the working class. In more recent years, Tina and Nathan have been partnering with local churches, serving alongside church leaders to see Taiwanese churches being bold in sharing their faith, passionate about making disciples, and to be involved in the Great Commission. Tina is passionate about preaching and teaching and helping others love the word of God.

Introduction

I grew up in a Christian home in a little town in rural Taiwan. Even though I listened to Bible stories in Sunday school and to sermons during my teenage years, I did not pursue the word of God with passion. The Bible seemed like something outside of my life. It was something I sometimes engaged with, but that was all. However, after college, I had a complete change in perspective on how I viewed the Bible. The Bible became real and applicable to every part of my life. I started to have passion and drive when I read my Bible. My passion for the word comes from experiencing a transformed life. I was able to recognize that the Bible was God's gift for me to know him more.

The Bible displays God's greatness, goodness, justice, love, faithfulness, and much more. Jesus, God's Son, was crucified for our sins and offers all sinners a way to salvation. Jesus intercedes for us before our Father. We live under the undeserving mercy and grace of God. That is a gift that I cannot turn my back on. When I finally understood the meaning of Christ's atoning work on the cross and responded to that act of love, everything changed. I started to build a life with a commitment to Scripture. When I started serving in Christian ministry in my twenties, I knew that any type of ministry I was involved in had to be built on the word of God. I wanted to be saturated with God's word so that my life could positively impact people.

Without God's revelation in his word, I would have no guidance and clarity regarding my own sins, my need for repentance and salvation, and my purpose in life. I would have no idea what God desires for his disciples to do on earth. Knowing this truth, I have made it my life's mission to continue to listen to and read his word as long as I can, as well as teach and share it wherever I go. God's word is the guiding compass for my life, and I would not want to live another day not being guided by it.

I have been so blessed to sit under so many great preachers and teachers of the word of God. Without listening to sound preaching, my life would have turned out very differently. I hunger, thirst, and yearn for sound preaching to feed my soul. By constantly surrounding myself with sound preaching and teaching, I am equipped to be a better disciple of Jesus. This is a long-term approach to life and ministry. As I continue to read the word of God and to listen to sound preaching, God's love and faithfulness overflow from me into others whom I teach, disciple, and share with.

This paper seeks to help readers understand the importance of sound preaching in our lives. We need to listen with attentive ears to God's word preached and allow the Holy Spirit to guide us along the way. By opening our ears to sound preaching, we are equipped to become better disciples of Jesus and enabled to make disciples of others.

Pursuing sound preaching

In this day and age, when we are bombarded with so many different messages of diverse quality, we desperately need sound preaching so that we can stand in and live out the truth. Sound preaching and teaching explains what God has revealed to us in his word. I believe sound preaching and teaching is essential to the church and to our individual Christian lives because it is the foundation of how we grow in maturity in Christ.

The whole counsel of God is seen throughout the Old and New Testaments. Preachers of the word should have a conviction and commitment to expound God's word faithfully as it is written in the Bible.

Sound preaching should be reliable, truthful, and biblical. We must preach truths based completely on the Bible,

regardless of how the world around us is evolving or changing. We need to hear what the Bible says, and not what we want it to say. Preachers of the word are responsible for teaching the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Without sound doctrine, it is easy for people to turn toward what sounds right in their own minds. I often hear Christian brothers and sisters say, “The pastor says we should do this” instead of “The Bible says we should do this.” It seems that what the pastor says takes precedence over what the Bible says. How much better it would be for the pastor to get his message from the Bible. However, when what the pastor says contradicts the Bible, many brothers and sisters I know would not question it because they believe the pastor.

Sound preaching can guide us to maturity and point out the ideas and practices that are leading us astray. Sound preaching will judge the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts (Heb 4:12). It can guide us on the path of purity (Ps 119:9) and be useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). It can equip God’s servants for every good work (2 Tim 3:17) and help them grow in maturity (Heb 6:1).

For sound preaching to take place, both the individual who prepares a sermon and the people who listen to it need to be guided by the Holy Spirit. The preacher needs the Spirit’s guidance to understand the word and handle it accurately. The listeners need the Spirit’s guidance to discern, understand, and apply the truths of God in their daily lives.

As we hear his inspired word proclaimed, the Holy Spirit will help us in our weakness so that we can see our need for God, things that we must do to correct our beliefs and practices, and ways we can serve him and his world. As we hear his inspired word proclaimed, the Holy Spirit transforms our head knowledge so that we can become lifelong disciples of Christ.

What an amazing and profound way God has designed for us to engage with his word. As we hear good preaching, we come face to face with Jesus himself and experience his resurrection power.



In John 14:26, Jesus said to his disciples, “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” The Holy Spirit dwells in every believer (Rom 8:9; Eph 1:13–14), and the Spirit’s role is to counsel, guide, and help us in the way of truth. It is therefore vital to see the Spirit’s work in sound preaching and in receiving what is taught to you.

Sound preaching is vital in our personal lives, in our church, and in our ministry. Paul warns us about the dangers of unsound doctrine.

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truths and wander off into myths. (2 Tim 4:3–4)

While we see the vital importance of sound doctrine, we also see that there will be a time when people reject sound doctrine. In fact, this was happening in Paul’s time and continues to happen today. We need to be prepared to defend the truth. Many people want God’s truth to fit their own thoughts and desires instead of wanting to hear what God truly has to say.

We need to value God’s word as the utmost authority. 1 Peter 1:23 says, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable,

through the living and enduring word of God.” God’s word brings life. As Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). When Jesus prayed his great high priestly prayer for his disciples, he asked his Father to “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). The Bible is God’s truth, Jesus was that truth in human flesh, and that the Holy Spirit is “the Spirit of truth” (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13; 1 John 4:6). Jesus held Scripture to be the ultimate truth and gave it the highest place of honor. So did the Spirit who breathed it out (2 Tim 3:16). So must we.

Nothing else on earth will satisfy the deepest needs of the human heart. As disciples of Christ, we must yearn for and desire the knowledge that comes from God and is found only in his word. Believers of all levels of maturity must have a foundation of consistent taking in of the word through sound teaching. We need to humbly submit ourselves to the authority of the Bible. There are no shortcuts or substitutes. Maturing as disciples takes time and it takes knowledge of and obedience to God’s word.

No preacher should speak for himself or herself, for they are merely ambassadors, messengers for Christ. Good, sound preaching allows us to encounter the living Christ. What an amazing and profound way God has designed for us to engage with his word. As we hear good preaching, we come face to face with Jesus himself and experience his resurrection power. I have been so blessed and privileged to sit under many wonderful, faithful preachers of the word. God’s word is so powerful, and when it is preached boldly, clearly, and faithfully, it can change lives. As Murray Capill says, “Grace-filled, heart-oriented

gospel preaching should lead people to a deep awareness of their need of God and of God's readiness to meet them in their need."¹ This is exactly what happened to me many times as I sat under faithful sound preaching:

Acts 17:18 records that Paul was in Athens preaching Christ and his resurrection power. The apostle recognized that when he preaches, he doesn't preach himself, but Christ crucified. In another setting, Paul wrote, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). Paul was determined to preach Christ crucified. In the surrounding texts, we learn that Paul did not try to impress the Corinthians

will actively live their lives to the glory of God and for the benefit of others."² The whole purpose of sound preaching is to see lives transformed through hearing God's word. This brings us to the second point: We need attentive ears to listen well to sound preaching so that our lives can be transformed, and we can display Christ for others to see.

Practicing attentive listening

In my teenage years, I started reading the Bible on my own. I would read and underline Bible passages that spoke to me and encouraged me. I remember listening to recordings of a well-known American pastor. While I didn't have a good understanding of biblical history and

times before, this time was different. The gospel became real to me. It was as if Jesus was walking out of the pages of the Bible and was standing in front of me. I was confronted by my sins once again, but in an entirely new way. This time I decided to respond to the gospel.

Life cannot be truly transformed until attentive listening and obedience happens. And listening is not a one-time act, but a lifelong journey—of actively listening, again and again, and then setting out to do what you have heard.

Can people sit through sound teaching and not be changed? Yes, absolutely. If it were that easy, we could simply just share the gospel over a big megaphone and whoever hears it will instantly become mature Christians. Becoming a follower of Jesus is about putting into practice the teachings of the Bible and that takes active listening on our part.

As essential as it is to preach sound doctrine, it is equally essential that we listen carefully to the word being preached. Hearing is a privilege, so let us not take it for granted. We have a responsibility to listen well. God's word is too important to simply be wasted. God's word demands a response, a change, an action. When our lives change, others can see Christ displayed in us.

Again and again, Jesus repeated the command "He who has ears, let him hear" (Matt 11:15; Mark 4:9, 23). We all have ears, but can we really hear?

Luke 8:5–15 records the familiar parable of the sower. The text reads: "As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience." According to Jesus, those who truly hear will live differently. Those who truly hear will bear fruit and live out the truths that they hear. Romans 2:13 says, "For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified."

Listening to sound preaching does not always make us comfortable. Being faced with our own sins, immaturity, shortcomings, pride, and selfish ambition is not easy. In fact, there are times when it can be difficult for us to sit through sound preaching. But if all the preaching we hear makes us feel happy, content, and comfortable, then we are probably not hearing the word of God correctly.

Life cannot be truly transformed until attentive listening and obedience happens. And listening is not a one-time act, but a lifelong journey—of actively listening, again and again, and then setting out to do what you have heard.

with excellence of speech or human wisdom. Paul's focus was on Christ—his death, his burial, and his resurrection. If Christ is preached truthfully, then it won't matter who is preaching. The message is more important than the messenger.

While we desperately need sound doctrine in preaching, we cannot simply stop there. Communication is a two-way process. While hearing sound preaching, the listeners have a responsibility to respond to God's word. In their book, *The Whole Counsel of God*, Patrick and Reid wrote, "Once more we see that teaching and learning the Bible is not just an end in and of itself, but is also a means of formation for people who

context, this pastor explained the passages clearly for me and opened my eyes to see the depth of the Bible. I gained a lot of knowledge as I nodded along to what I was hearing and reading from the word.

However, knowledge of the Bible did not bring me into a deep relationship with God. I could explain the gospel to a stranger, but I couldn't live it out. I knew Christ died for me, but I couldn't truly take up my cross and follow him. God's word didn't have a firm foundation in my life.

After several years, someone again shared the gospel with me, and this time I truly listened. While I heard it many



The writer of Hebrews says, “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb 4:12). The word of our holy God should cut through our idols, our pride, our control, and our desire to be our own god. We need to be broken before we can be restored. The word of God should interrupt our lives so we can humbly come before God and realign our lives to his purposes.

Jesus taught that “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4). As followers of Christ, we must ensure his word becomes central to everything we do. It is the word of God alone that has the power to convict, empower, and transform a human life. I was hungry for God, and I was looking for answers. Listening to recordings of God’s word preached ignited a passion in me to seek out solid, biblical preaching for the course of my life. Active listening to the word saved me from a life of hopelessness to a living faith in Jesus Christ.

As we respond to sound preaching by careful and attentive listening, our actions, speech, and hearts will be more and more aligned with God. Our love for God and his word comes from active listening and responding. We are like clay in the hands of an expert potter, being molded and sanctified constantly to do his good works. In discipleship, we model this lifestyle of being a follower of Christ and we journey along with other people as they grow in maturity, as they are molded by God’s word.

Listening to sound preaching is ultimately about responding rightly to God’s word. Good, active listening will lead to deep self-reflection, and this leads to action. The gospel is the aroma that either brings death or life. There is no in between. We respond rightly or we respond negatively. We grow or we shrivel. We are humble or we are prideful. There is no neutrality when we truly listen to the sound doctrines from the word.

We desperately need God’s truth to speak to us so we can combat the counter-productive and contradictory voices from the world. No voice is as dangerous as the inner voice that responds to our own desires and shapes our decisions. This is because we are fallen creatures. Too often, our first instincts are wrong and destructive. Too often, we lean upon our own understanding. We can

The gospel is the aroma that either brings death or life. There is no in between. We respond rightly or we respond negatively. We grow or we shrivel. We are humble or we are prideful. There is no neutrality when we truly listen to the sound doctrines from the word.

twist the truth, ignore it, and go on with our lives as practical atheists.

God’s voice is counterintuitive and countercultural. God warns us that there is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death (Prov 14:12). I love the thought that sound biblical preaching brings God’s voice back into focus. We don’t need many voices, but we need the right voice. God’s word desperately needs to be heard.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of the readiness of God to receive and restore those who have wandered from his thoughts and his ways:

Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. (Isa 55:6–8)

Isaiah’s words to ancient Israel are equally needed today. People need to seek the Lord and turn to him for mercy. But the only way they can do that is to listen to his thoughts and follow in his ways, because they are so unlike ours though they are the only ones that are true.

As Charles Spurgeon states, “To me the Bible is not God, but it is God’s voice, and I do not hear it without awe.”³ We should similarly be in awe that God chooses to speak to us through his word. The Creator of the universe wants us to know him intimately, so why don’t we listen to him attentively?

When we came to the mission field in Taiwan, our children were very young. For several years, I could not sit through a sermon because I had to watch our children. Having three young boys only two years apart running around and demanding that I meet their every

need during a church service took the necessary time away that I would otherwise use to listen to a sermon. I really struggled to get my intake of good, solid, sound preaching at the local church. I felt constantly tired, drained, and most of all, spiritually dry. Of course I could read the Bible on my own time, and I did. However, I still desired to listen to sound preaching. So about eight years ago, I decided to listen to a sermon on a weekly basis through YouTube or another app. There are many wonderful preachers available online that we can listen to, and different biblical books and series that we can choose from. Obviously, it took some time to discern who provided sound preaching and who did not. I did not just pick any random preacher. But I soon landed on about a dozen preachers who I would listen to regularly.



Even in the busyness of having young children at home, listening to God’s word became a priority in my life. I would wake up before all the kids and go out for a walk while I listened to my sermon for the day. I originally wanted this to become a weekly occurrence, but it soon became a daily habit that I still look forward to. I anticipate what will come the next day because many of the

sermons are part of a series. As I listen to expository preaching, I long to hear how the preacher will complete his study of a chapter or a biblical book. Listening to sound preaching has become a non-negotiable in my life. I now look forward to my time with the Lord and cannot imagine walking this journey of life without a consistent intake of hearing his word. I need to be reminded, rebuked, encouraged, and guided through the word of God and I am grateful for preachers that God uses to speak into my life.

Producing effective disciples

A disciple is a learner or follower.⁴ When giving the Great Commission, Jesus commanded his disciples:

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matt 28:18–20)

Feeding is not a one-time thing but a continual teaching and pouring of the word of God into the lives of others. We, like Peter, have the responsibility of feeding God’s truth to others, to build, to train, to rebuke, to teach others the word of God.

The disciples were commanded by Jesus to go and make disciples of all nations. While this was a command for the disciples at that time, it is also something that we, as followers of Jesus Christ, need to obey today.

In Romans 10:14, Paul writes, “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?” As gospel-bearers who bring the good news to the world, we have a responsibility to teach the word of God.

In Luke’s record, Jesus’ public ministry began when he entered a synagogue, picked up the scroll of Isaiah, read it, and taught from it (Luke 4:14–22). In various accounts in the book of Acts, people came to believe through the public teaching of the disciples. We can clearly see that the disciples



followed up on Jesus’ ministry, teaching and preaching at every opportunity.

Paul exhorted Timothy to “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season” (2 Tim 4:2). Not only did Paul preach at the opportunities presented to him, he also exhorted Timothy to do the same. God’s people need to gather around to hear his word read and preached. We need to be fed the word of God so we can disciple others. That is the command given to us by Jesus.

In John 21:17, Jesus commanded Peter to “Feed my sheep.” Feeding is not a one-time thing but a continual teaching and pouring of the word of God into the lives of others. We, like Peter, have the responsibility of feeding God’s truth to others, to build, to train, to rebuke, to teach others the word of God. This call to feed Jesus’ sheep is a big responsibility, but a tremendous privilege and joy. What can be better than teaching someone the word and truth of our holy God?

As we disciple others, we need to recognize that sound doctrine has eternal value. Sound doctrine is essential to us as individuals, and to the church as a body of Christ. Sound doctrine paves the way to maturity in Christ. Paul thus tells Timothy to “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim 4:16).

In this verse, Paul addresses both life and doctrine. Life is how we conduct ourselves to the world and doctrine is what we believe. While we can say we live a Christian life, we must still continue to be immersed in sound doctrine so our lives can be in check and our minds can be renewed. Sound biblical doctrine saves the lost and empowers the saved.

In their book *Walking Together on the Jesus Road*, Evelyn and Richard Hibbert write, “Disciplers are living examples of what it means to follow Christ. Whether we intend to or not, we reproduce ourselves in those we disciple.”⁵ Our disciples learn not only from what we say, but also from who we are and what we are passionate about. Ultimately, we want people we disciple to imitate Christ. So our lives should reflect Christ living in us. When God’s truth penetrates deep into our souls, we simply cannot keep the greatest joy of knowing Christ silent and not share it with others.

In the process of disciple making, we need to be disciplers who hold a high view of sound doctrine. When we revere the word, others can see it. When we live by the truth of the word, others can see it. That is what discipleship is. We walk by faith while being fed and transformed by God’s word. We listen obediently while we share and walk this life journey with others.

Simply knowing the content of the Bible is not a guarantee that spiritual growth will happen. We cannot assume that we can just get the word of God into people’s heads, then the Spirit of God will apply it to their hearts. The Holy Spirit can convict of sin and move people towards repentance and understanding. However, how and when the Spirit moves is not something we can determine,

With all the other voices demanding their attention, we desperately need to teach others how to listen and discern God’s word. To do that,

but an act of God. Discipleship takes time and it is the work of the God that moves a person to a transformed life.

Discipleship is not done in isolation. As Greg Ogden says, “To be a follower of Christ is to understand that there is no such thing as solo discipleship.”⁶ Discipleship occurs in a relationship with others. We see examples of these relationships throughout Scripture. In the Old Testament, for example, God raised up Joshua under Moses, and Elijah shepherds Elisha. The New Testament shows us the relationships Jesus had with his disciples and Paul had with Timothy.

Discipleship is a commitment to a lifelong journey of following Jesus, no matter how hard life can get. I have known people who were determined to follow Jesus, but as time went on, they found it too hard, or they simply just walked away or quit worshipping with other Christians. I always find these situations to be heartbreaking. True discipleship calls for an unwavering commitment to the cross, no matter the cost. And what a tremendous privilege and joy it is to disciple others and to teach others to make disciples.

In discipleship, we guide, lead, correct, and train others by the word of God. We also model what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We help others love and follow Jesus, and we prepare them to show others how to do the same. We are to make disciples who make disciples. Discipleship is not just a program that we follow or a check list that we check off—it is a lifelong process. While there are many helpful books and programs available, we cannot think that by completing a twelve-week course that discipleship has been completed. I once heard a pastor say that he will never get bored with reading the Bible because he learns something new every time. True discipleship that is grounded in the word of God should never end, and we should seek to grow in our understanding of the word every chance we get.

In Matthew 28:20, Jesus says to the disciples that they should be “teaching

them to obey everything I have commanded you.” Besides reading the Bible on our own, how would we know what Jesus taught if we didn’t listen to sound preaching? How would we know how to live out what Jesus commanded if we didn’t actively listen and apply the truths? Doing so leads us on in biblical discipleship and helps us so that our lives demonstrate that we live out the sound preaching that we actively hear.

Jesus commanded his disciples to teach the truth, and we, as Jesus’ disciples, have that responsibility as well. How do people obey if we don’t teach the truth? With all the other voices demanding their attention, we desperately need to teach others how to listen and discern God’s word. To do that, we need to enter the messiness of people’s lives. Discipleship involves walking with finite and fallen people, sharing with them, living life with them in fellowship, love, and service to show them Jesus’ love. How can we teach others to do something that we are not doing? Discipleship is not about telling others what to do, but it is about bringing others along this journey that we are already on with Christ.

As we go into all the world, we are to make disciples, teaching them all that Jesus commanded. We are to teach the whole counsel of God. We are to teach both Old and New Testaments as faithfully and as accurately as we can. After the resurrection, when Jesus appeared to his disciples in the upper room, he predicted that “repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached ... to all nations” (Luke 24:47). We are similarly to help others know who Jesus is and of their need for the Savior. The whole Bible is one big story of God’s grace, redemption, and saving power through Jesus Christ, and we have the privilege of sharing that with others as we make them into disciples.

The church of Jesus Christ should be a preaching church, and the people of Christ should be a learning people. We are being prepared for eternal life with God through the work that we do. So, we might say that the

church has a ministry of preaching, of teaching, of learning, of listening, and of obedience. This is an ongoing process as we continue the ministry of Jesus here on earth until he returns.

Conclusion

To summarize, we, as ministers of the word, should passionately pursue sound preaching and teaching in our lives with attentive ears so that we can minister and disciple others who, in return, will become disciple makers. It is imperative that we recognize the authority of Scripture. We also need to recognize and be willing to be guided by the Holy Spirit who gave us his word to learn and to live.

As John Piper has written, “the chief and ultimate aims of preaching are impossible apart from the miraculous working of the Holy Spirit. Without his supernatural work, neither the preacher nor the people can see or savor the beauty and worth of God.”⁷ I firmly believe that all life and ministry should derive from the Spirit working through the revelation of God.

As we hold God’s word in the highest place and do our best to provide sound preaching for our hearers and attentively listen to the sound preaching given by others, we will see the nations discipled as the Holy Spirit guides, encourages, intercedes for, and sanctifies us in his truth. I stand in awe of God’s saving mercy in my life and the privilege of serving him in the limited capacity that I have. Let us continue to pursue sound preaching with attentive ears so we can passionately become makers of disciples who make disciples. **MRT**

¹ Murray Capill, *The Heart is the Target: Preaching Practical Application from Every Text* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), 39–40.

² Tim Patrick and Andrew Reid, *The Whole Counsel of God: Why and How to Teach the Entire Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 43

³ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “The Word a Sword,” a sermon preached at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, 17 May 1888. <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-word-a-sword/#flipbook/> (accessed 29 July 2024).

⁴ Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2020), notes, section 137.

⁵ Evelyn and Richard Hibbert, *Walking Together on the Jesus Road: Discipling in Intercultural Contexts* (Littleton, CO: William Carey, 2018), 18.

⁶ Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2016), 33.

⁷ John Piper, *Expository Exultation: Christian Preaching as Worship* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 105

The Role of Western People in Theological Education for Africa Today: An Appeal for “Vulnerability”

Jim Harries



Jim Harries (PhD, University of Birmingham, UK) has lived and ministered in East Africa since 1988. Challenged by his observation of cultural estrangement with Westerners, Jim has lived within an African family in indigenous conditions in a Kenyan village, travelling by bicycle. His major pursuit has been theological education—using the Luo and Swahili languages—with an orientation to indigenous churches. Jim has published widely in peer-reviewed and other journals promoting the practice of vulnerable mission. His published books include two novels.

Introduction

This article intentionally concerns the role of Western people in theological education in Africa. It is not intended to give advice to African people themselves. It is not necessarily suggesting that the whole of theological education needs to be transformed. Its objectives are more modest. This article addresses Westerners. It seeks to outline contributions that Westerners can helpfully make to a whole system that they do not (and ought not) themselves control. This is in the light of the fact that Christian theological education of many kinds is already happening. Westerners will not be able to control that or, in many ways, to understand it. If Westerners want to contribute to what is happening, the question I here ask is how they should do so. In other words, if the objective is for African people to better know Jesus, then what should Western people do to help facilitate that?

As this short article cannot totally answer the above question, I instead attempt to draw on personal experience to lay out a structure and broad proposal. I appreciate that in doing so I will leave many gaps and frayed edges in my arguments, but I cannot plug all the gaps or tidy all the edges in one article. I encourage my reader to explore related materials I have produced over the years, many of which are posted on my Academia.edu page.¹ See also the web materials of the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission.²

One of my aims in this article is to demonstrate that helpful, sustainable interventions into African communities by Westerners require *both* use of local

languages and reliance on locally available resources. In this way, interventions can build upon, rather than circumvent or dominate, what is already happening indigenously. I suggest that neither use of local languages with outside resources, nor use of outside languages (like English) with local resources, will enable theological education to be truly effective. I will first focus on language, then on resources, although there is (in my understanding) a lot of overlap between these two.

The principles advocated in this article—that some Western missionaries practice key ministry using indigenous languages and resources—is known as “vulnerable mission”.³

Theological education: Language focus

Jesus had disciples. He thus gave us models of what we should be, and how we ought to be it. The Apostle Paul, himself a disciple of Jesus, puts it like this: “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim 2:2, NIV).

We today face a fundamental issue in cross-cultural theological education that Paul does not mention and that Jesus largely did not face since they both engaged Mediterranean people who, to a large extent, had a common history and had been trading, mixing, and even intermarrying for centuries. The issue I refer to is that languages carve up the world in which people live in different ways. Languages, and their communities, think using different

One of my aims in this article is to demonstrate that helpful, sustainable interventions into African communities by Westerners require *both* use of local languages and reliance on locally available resources.

categories. This makes translation difficult and, consistently, inaccurate. Hence my question: How should theological texts and wisdom that the West has translated for Africa today?

Language categories, having different shapes,⁴ can lead to flawed translation that easily troubles communication. In some ways, this renders translation impossible. I will concentrate on differences between modern (European) languages that Westerners use amongst themselves and non-modernised languages, such as those of Africa. Comaroff and Comaroff use the term, “Afromodernity” in their article “Afromodernity and the New World Order.”⁵ They explain that African people who use English consider themselves to be participating in modernity. Yet their understanding of what modernity is can remain vastly different from that of Western people. “All other modernities are ... mimics of a real thing whose full realisation elsewhere is, at best, infinitely deferred ... at worst, flatly impossible.”⁶ The Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and, even more recently, colonialism and modernity, have transformed European tongues. We can broadly assume that European people no longer use their languages as they once used them, because meanings arise from the use of a language.⁷ Languages being *used* differently results in what they mean being different than were they still to have been used as originally.

Terry Evens classifies European languages as dualistic; that is, they largely assume that there is a clear boundary between thinking subjects and the world that those subjects engage.⁸ This mind-as-against-matter dualism is often credited to the French philosopher René Descartes.⁹ I here ask, what happens if European language texts or discourses are transported to people whose languages (and their associated populations) do things in other than dualistic ways, what Evens calls *non-dualistic*?¹⁰ The outcome, I suggest, often includes considerable confusion.

According to Ludwig Wittgenstein, James Frazer found primitive people’s belief in the efficacy of magical practices to be “a kind of foolishness.”¹¹ Wittgenstein responded that Frazer was the foolish one. Evens reports: “Wittgenstein argues that Frazer’s understanding of magic as a kind

of foolishness is itself foolish, as it attributes to such practices a rational and instrumental objective that they do not entertain and fails to grasp their essentially expressive nature.”¹² Wittgenstein asks, in effect, why was Frazer faulting people for failing to do something they had not set out to do in the first place? Hence Wittgenstein’s explanation: “In magical healing one indicates to an illness that it should leave the patient. After the description of any such magical cure we’d like to add: If the illness doesn’t understand that, then I don’t know how one ought to say it.”¹³

One wonders how well missionaries have done in the last century or so in Africa with respect to parallels to these observations about Africans being non-dualistic? Some have certainly followed Frazer’s example and have mocked local practices. Others, through largely ignoring local practices, have busily translated texts and processes that work on the basis of Western dualism—for non-dualistic people as if they are dualistic. As a

... languages carve up the world in which people live in different ways. Languages, and their communities, think using different categories.

result, recipients of translations end up with little clue about the dualistic practices underlying what they read or are told. In the absence of dualistic foundations—hearers not making a clear distinction between the world around them and their understanding of it—translation processes have not worked for non-dualistic people. As a result, Africans have become dependent on Westerners, not only in theology, but in economics, sociology, science, and many other fields of knowledge.

Our focus here is on the pivotal issue of theology. It is pivotal because neither dualism nor nondualism are topics one is taught in school. Rather, they are grounds to thinking that one presupposes as one learns things in school. They are the culturally conditioned foundation on which learning can occur. Because they constitute the ground on which learning occurs, what is learned will not itself shift the ground; it will only build on it. Shifting the ground—moving between dualism and nondualism—requires something more foundational—something even deeper

than either dualism or nondualism. The ground on which these basic philosophies themselves sit, I suggest, is theology, or, at least, theological. This is demonstrated by Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras, who points out that Western people’s tendency to believe and think dualistically is an outcome of a theological choice—whether or not to believe that God has *energies*, that is, activities in the world.¹⁴ The Orthodox Church believes we can learn about God from his energies as well as his essence. According to Yannaras, the Western Church instead wants to know him only in his essence. Only knowing God in his essence leaves what happens in the world open to rational interpretation. This causes a “banishment of God into the realm of the empirically inaccessible” and so a domination by rationality.

Misunderstandings between dualistic and non-dualistic comprehension are constantly replayed in interactions between Westerners and Africans. In magical healing, for example, one

indicates to an illness that it should leave the patient.¹⁶ When English texts in use in Africa refer to healing, then, to a large extent, indigenous people expect those texts to provide guidance on how, “if the illness doesn’t understand that, ... to say it” differently.¹⁷ This applies whether or not the English is translated into indigenous languages. In reverse, when Africans explain healing as a way of telling an illness to leave the patient, then the implication from Frazer is that missionaries may well consider those Africans foolish because they just do not seem to grasp modern scientific medical practices.

Overcoming the above issue is no joke. It is difficult! We need to consider language and its relationship to the culture and way of life of a people. In order to appreciate, understand, and participate in a way of life, one clearly must know the language in which that way of life is expressed. In order to know the language as the native speakers know it, one must clearly participate in their way of life as a necessary part of the process of learning the language.

In my experience in Africa, Westerners' learning of local people's languages has become—and is becoming—more and more difficult. This difficulty has deep economic roots. Failures in communication between the West and Africa, such as those mentioned above (non-dualistic Africans using dualistic languages as if they are non-dualistic), have ensured that while the West thrives, independent thinking in Africa remains stuck in a mire of confusion. For Western languages to bring thriving, they must be used in Western ways, i.e., for our purposes here, dualistically.

The failure to build productive indigenous economies has resulted in a clear and radical preference for Western languages throughout the African continent. Because African people do not comprehend Western languages in the same way as native speakers, Africans' use of those languages for their own purposes helps them less than would their own languages. They struggle to be clear on their own issues when they have to present and engage such issues using someone else's tongue. As a result, use of a Western language helps Africans primarily when a Westerner remains in control and able to implement the policies or ideas expressed in the Western language.

Westerners tend to give large rewards to people who speak their Western language(s) fluently. That is, they reward people with jobs, gifts, friendship, contacts in the West, references, etc. if they can demonstrate knowledge of a European language, even should that knowledge not render them productive.¹⁸ Thriving, as recognised today in Africa, is largely an outcome of using Western languages.¹⁹

African people's desperate desire for and widespread use of Western languages make talking with Westerners using indigenous tongues into what seems like a waste of time. African people much prefer Westerners to concentrate on bringing resources or giving access to progress rather than

learning African languages—which is seen as an increasingly “useless” way of communicating. Many may prefer to deny that their languages represent ways in which they think, as that would, in today's parlance, imply that they are “primitive”.

For a Westerner to learn how Africans think and communicate by living with African people, especially over an extended period, is notoriously difficult. Much of this difficulty is related to the above-mentioned issues that contribute to African people's desperation for status and economic reward, for which they are constantly jostling.²⁰ This desperation for reward translates into competition for the attention of Westerners who can end up being fought over by people who do not make their intentions very clear to those Westerners. Yet sharing life with a people is perhaps the only way to learn to use their languages correctly in terms of categories, worldview, philosophy, and so on. For one to make sense in Africa when talking about healing, for example, one must be able to use an African language with respect to indigenous comprehension of healing rather than using a foreign language that carries a different comprehension. This requirement for an indigenous comprehension that applies to healing also applies to every other term and phrase in an indigenous language. So, we could say in brief: for a Westerner to learn to use an African language correctly is to learn a radically different way of life. Only that “correct” way of learning will enable intimate and mutually understandable communication. For Western missionaries to seriously contribute to theological education in Africa in a way that does not primarily lead to unhealthy dependency on foreign assistance, they need to know a local language much as locals know it. Then they should use that language.

For reasons already mentioned, and others not mentioned here (such as the enormous power of envy in Africa that easily has people jostle for attention



Prayers for a troubled couple in an indigenous church in Kenya.

from any Western missionary who seems to have available resources²¹), this requires the missionary concerned to not be involved in distribution of resources of foreign origin.

Yet learning an African language these days has become incredibly difficult. Adding to the difficulty is the fact that Africa is known to be a place of many languages. This quickly raises the question: which language is most appropriate for theological education in Africa? The answer is in a sense simple: it is appropriate for a theological educator from the West to choose almost any African language. The foreign mission worker needs to select a language, learn it, then use it to teach. But then, what of speakers of other languages—members of other tribes? Surely it is better to enable people from different tribes to attend a theology class by using a regional (typically European) language, so that godly insights spread more widely and quickly? This reasoning is widely followed. The difficulty is that although it saves Westerners a lot of work,²² this practice results in language and cultural category confusions.

Here we have, in fact, another reason for theological education not to be linked to foreign funds. If a theological education programme in language X

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is funded from overseas, then this will result in protests from other language groups (tribes) who miss out through not being members of tribe X. Continuing with theological education using any one African language without evoking envious opposition requires that foreign funds do not come in hand with the theological education concerned. If others see that the tribe of the language being used in theological education does not thrive economically due to outside aid, then potential opposition and envious attacks can gradually dwindle, allowing education to continue in peace.

Imparting theological education to a people without the sweeteners of some kind of foreign funds is, in my experience (and according to my reading), a very difficult challenge. The fact that it is such a difficult challenge illustrates its necessity. In other words, it illustrates the large degree to which Western-originated, designed, or managed avenues of theological education are inappropriate. They are preferred for economic, not for theological reasons.²³ Western people seeking to provide theological education need to recognise, then acknowledge, these difficulties and change how they do things. That is, if Westerners believe the gospel of Jesus to be universal (as many do), yet a people reject it if it does not come with economic sweeteners, then there must be a problem with how it is being presented.

I participated in a theological programme in western Kenya, with no economic sweeteners, from 1993 to 2011. Locals who sensed my frustration at failing to get a good number of committed students, encouraged me to include healing as part of the programme

For Western missionaries to seriously contribute to theological education in Africa in a way that does not primarily lead to unhealthy dependency on foreign assistance, they need to know a local language much as locals know it. Then they should use that language.

(in the African sense of saying things to a disease in the right way, not biomedical healing). For various reasons, I did not do so. I allowed the programme to collapse in 2011.²⁴ I have since continued to search for those modes of presentation of theological education that are truly appealing to indigenous people. These days I share God's word by participating in events run and put on by local people, that use their languages, rather than setting up a programme myself. When I attend these events, I may or I may not be asked to share God's Word.

Should there be a theological education programme in Africa using an indigenous language that succeeds—i.e., comes to be truly valued in its local form—then I suggest that spread of this programme into other language groups may not be difficult and could happen very quickly. Even the most antagonistic of inter-tribal relationships are not likely to result either in zero bilingual people, or zero knowledge by one tribe about what is happening amongst another tribe. To the contrary, once benefits of an indigenous language theological programme begin to show, members of neighbouring tribes may well will be inquisitive, interested, and will want to know about what is happening. They may then adapt and appropriate what they have found to their own contexts

so as to share in anticipated benefits that arise from it. Members of the original tribe who are touched by the need to share God's love, will also seek to reach other tribes. This is why Western mission efforts ought to concentrate on reaching one tribe and one language theologically. If this is done in a local language and without investing outside resources, then successful outcomes are likely to quickly and easily attract others from neighbouring tribes and language groups to adjust what is happening to their own contexts so as to share in the resultant benefits. This seems to happen all the time with Christian denominations that frequently cross tribal boundaries. It results in a sustainable means of continuing to share theological knowledge. Even the very possibility of this happening exposes serious issues with theological education programmes today that use Western languages and outside resources.

Theological education: Resources focus with indigenous language

This section presents a (shorter) re-iteration of the above language focus, this time beginning with resources. I begin by assuming that there is good reason for Christians to embrace poverty. I take, for example, the biblical story of the rich young man who was encouraged to sell all he had in order to follow Jesus (Mark 10:17–31). I could also go into a long discussion on just how Jesus' orientation in favour of the poor should best be understood, as, for example, entered into by Kanagaraj.²⁵ For the purposes of this article, I will simply assume, as do many Catholics, that Jesus has a "preferential option for the poor."²⁶

If indeed Christians—and for our purposes more specifically missionaries—ought to be poor, then in today's Africa, this will be a means of attracting less attention to themselves. Western missionaries are more likely to be ignored, or taken less seriously, if they do not include aid packages and



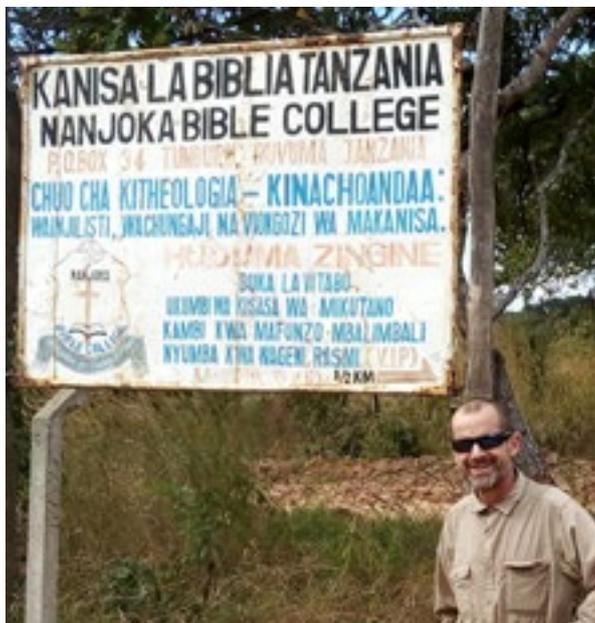
Jim with pastoral training students, Tanzania.

practice “generosity” to the poor. Once finding themselves relatively ignored, a missionary can concentrate on attracting people to the Word of God in a way that does not draw on their foreignness, i.e., a way that local people can imitate. If local people imitate what this missionary is doing, then it can subsequently spread widely, effectively, and rapidly, by the power of God’s Spirit working in people’s hearts, without foreign subsidy.

This relative ignoring of Western missionaries is only likely if they use indigenous and not Western languages. This is because Western languages have a lot of inherent value. An African person’s familiarity with a Western or colonial language is often a good indication of their status in their community and even their earnings. Should they use a European language, a Westerner will draw the attention especially of people aspiring to be wealthy and influential, even if they have no handouts. This is particularly true if they are a native-speaker of a European language that is widely used in Africa, such as English. Those who have a native-type fluency of such a language can easily attract the most wealth and prestige.

I believe that a missionary’s role can at times best be fulfilled when being ignored by the powerful and those aspiring to be powerful. This can help to leave time and emotional energy to invest into less prosperous sectors of a community, and into spiritually-oriented activities, such as articulating the words of Jesus. Since those are the sectors that are most likely to use indigenous languages, associating with them will open many doors to language learning that would not have opened had the missionary been concentrating on working with the better off in the community.

Use of, and the ability to hear and understand, an indigenous tongue, when combined with a disconnect from the obvious attractiveness of foreign-originated wealth, puts a missionary into a position in which they can discern what is going on around them. The longer the missionary stays around, the more discerning they can be. When they are not providing money alongside it, people are likely to be honest to tell them if what



Kanisa la Biblia [Church of the Bible] Bible college in Nanjoka, Tanzania.

they are promoting is not desirable or helpful. They can vote with their feet and abandon projects set up by a resource-poor missionary without risking losing out economically. Hence, this poor missionary can become familiar with where people are actually itching and what scratching they are needing in a way that someone working in a resource-based ministry never can be. Gradually, perhaps subconsciously rather than overtly, one might say tacitly,²⁷ such a missionary will hone their words and teaching to local conditions, including the condition of people’s understanding, such as their adherence (or not) to nondualism. That is to say, a poor missionary’s communication of theological education will omit *faux pas* and become more contextually relevant. Eventually, people may even want to hear them speak simply because of the inherent value of what they communicate, rather than as a link to wealth or prestige.

Such a missionary has something of value to share, and as a result people who have an interest in acquiring it can in due course result in neighbouring tribes becoming interested as well. Their members will translate what they pick up into the language that facilitates its relevance for their own people. Again, in this case, this will happen without (or at

least while minimising) promotion of the prosperity gospel (i.e., the association between the gospel and the high-resource Western ways of life). Thus, theological education and the gospel of Jesus will spread in contextually appropriate ways. The foreign missionary will themselves learn to be a Jesus follower in more and more depth, and in a way appropriate to the local context. Their own faith may, to some extent at least, take on an indigenous form.

How to become indigenous

I have articulated above many advantages that accrue when a missionary of Western origin manages to identify as an indigenous person. I suspect that many will be ready to acknowledge what is in a sense obvious: that cultural, geographical, linguistic, and other proximity to indigenous African people will, through enhancement of understanding, enable missionary work. Yet, many Western missionaries are defeated in their aspirations to achieve this status. I have already described the requirement of using local languages and local resources in some detail. I think these things are key. Now I want to explore what this looks like in more detail in actual situations.

I believe that one key to this process is how one manages the interface between one’s original and one’s anticipated new identities and contexts. In essence, what a missionary needs to do in this day and age is, as far as possible, to leave their Western self behind when they cross into indigenous territory. That is to say, they should keep the two distinct. They should avoid connecting the two more than is necessary. This will clearly run contrary to a great deal of contemporary logic which believes that the best thing one can do for Africa is always more and more exposure to the West—especially donor money and Western languages!

Note that engaging the above means of identifying with native people might well require refusing to do what they

Identifying with native people might well require refusing to do what they themselves advise you to do.

themselves advise you to do. As already mentioned, African people—quite reasonably in many respects—desire to benefit from Western wealth and prosperity. As a result, they may overtly encourage a Western missionary to provide money and to be satisfied to use a Western language. A missionary who takes this advice will be following the wrong advice. Hence, the emphasis often given to working under local people and listening to them so as to do what they recommend, can be misguided. A Western missionary must be ready to refuse advice that denies them vulnerability—i.e., when it involves use of a foreign language, provision of resources, or involvement in a system that is built on one or both of these two. A missionary must, of course, listen very carefully indeed. They should listen to people who are speaking their indigenous language and make every attempt to understand what is said as it is indigenously understood. Then the missionary must use their own spiritual sense, wisdom, and understanding when it comes to basics of how to relate to people.

A missionary who wants to identify with people “spiritually” needs to prioritise appropriately. Some activities, and some missionary orientations, can distract from the spiritual by drawing the missionary into demanding roles, such as administration and providing accountability for outside funds. A missionary who wants to engage with people spiritually must be ready to refuse certain activities. The alternative they need to refuse may be things that could save people’s lives or improve their material situation in the short

term. Traditional African ways of life tend to result in poverty. Links between overall prosperity and what could be termed Western rationality can be great. This tends to result in non-dualistic (e.g., African) people finding themselves in situations that would, by Western standards, be considered beyond the pale. Yet, for a missionary to solve these kinds of problems will soon have them acquire an identity as a donor, so a provider of resources, with all the difficulties that this entails. Not to solve a crisis—for example, by providing for funds for simple medicine such as malaria treatment—might even be illegal in the country of the missionary’s origins.

Missionaries need to think very carefully about just what they are prepared to give. I advocate giving one’s life. As an illustration, I give a personal example. Some years ago (in 1997), I saw an opportunity to take orphaned African children into my home. I knew that would require my home language to be an indigenous tongue. It precluded my getting married (unless I found a superwoman, and I have not so far). It required me to behave like an African. It required me to invest decades of my life in a fatherly role appropriate for African children. I continue this role to this day.

Many calculate that the more resources one has to use or give out, the more one will achieve. Having less, they may reason, means they will achieve less. But use of foreign languages and handing out resources (including working at a Western-resourced theological college) also have their problems.

In many ways, for some Western missionaries at least, it is better not to use financial resources in their ministry.

I am not precluding the possibility of a missionary’s retaining a very Western home life. I am instead saying that such a home life should be kept distinct from a missionary’s key relationships in their service. So, a missionary may live in a brick house with electricity, have laptops, Wi-Fi, running water, own one or more vehicles, go on foreign holidays, use European languages, eat ice cream and meat in abundance, watch movies, put children in the best schools, and so on. A missionary’s family may exist entirely in this context. But a missionary, in front of local people, should be more ashamed of, than proud of, such an environment. “My wife would leave me if I didn’t do that,” kind of thing. If living such a profligate life in a sea of poverty is troubling to the missionary’s conscience, and to that of the family, then perhaps they ought to reduce their profligacy. Some are likely to leave the field to continue enjoying a lifestyle like that elsewhere—in the USA or the UK for example. That would actually be a continuation of profligacy amongst poverty, just at a greater distance. That “greater distance” is much less these days due to the widespread use of smart phones and the internet.

Should someone have forty hours per week available, then let them give those forty hours per week with the African people. If sixty hours, then those sixty. If ten, then those ten. Those hours need to be spent on “the other side of the line”. European languages are not to cross that line. Neither are profligate lifestyles nor foreign donations.

Here are a few additional suggestions:

1. The circumstances of one’s Western home life should not be secret to those with whom one ministers. There will be a minimal number of African people who occasionally see how you live when you are not in the African community practicing missionary vulnerability. But those people should not benefit materially from their exposure to your domestic/foreign self.
2. A missionary who follows the recommendations made in this article must be very careful regarding their relationships with other missionaries (and other fellow Westerners). Lack of



Annual conference in Jim’s home church in Kenya

care will result in such relationships compromising their “vulnerable” stand (i.e., it could result indirectly in providing Western languages and foreign resources). For example, should a vulnerable missionary advise a conventional missionary which person they should trust with some donor funds, they will indirectly be giving that person money, which will compromise their relationship with them and others. This may require a polite but distant relationship with non-vulnerable missionary colleagues.

3. Marriage is a very relevant topic. Marrying an African can have advantages. It can certainly give one a local family and, as a result, singular access to indigenous contexts that can be learning contexts and contexts of ministry. On the other hand, marrying a national may well make it impossible in practice to prevent one’s spouse from going contrary to the recommendations I give above. (Nondualistic African thinking does not separate spiritual from material blessing. An African spouse will, it seems to me from my understanding, be put under a lot of pressure to be financially generous in a way contrary to what I am here suggesting.) If the spouse is Western, vulnerable mission can easily strain the marriage relationship. Will the spouse be prepared to allow the missionary to have time for vulnerable exposure? It may be difficult to relate profoundly to a spouse if one has transformed one’s own understanding (say of dualism) through many profound experiences that the spouse has not shared. There are very good reasons for some missionaries to serve while celibate.

Conclusion

The prerogative to disconnect with the West and identify with the indigenous is vital. Reasons to not do so may, in reality, be excuses. That is to say, some missionaries’ insistence that they be financially generous to the people they are reaching can become a means of manipulating relationships. Sharing resources makes the missionary feel wanted. People they have paid will encourage them. This style of ministry will facilitate the kind of texts, pictures, or videos that financial supporters in the West want to see. If the missionary’s objective is to achieve the kinds of things Westerners value

The prerogative to disconnect with the West and identify with the indigenous is vital. Reasons to not do so may, in reality, be excuses.

happening in Africa and aim for status, then all this would be fine.

To conclude, I would not like to advocate that missionaries refuse to be generous to all. They may, on the contrary, be generous to some people. But those to whom the missionary is financially generous should not be the same people with whom they do key ministry. (In my own case, I have reared local orphans without giving them peculiar advantages—resource or linguistic—arising from my identity as a Westerner, using my own resources.) That way they will be known for generosity, while their relationships with people with whom they minister will not be built on foreign finance. In summary, some Western missionaries should engage in theological training and other ministry in Africa using indigenous languages and resources. **MRT**

¹ A search for the term “English” in <https://jimharries.academia.edu/research> will reveal eighteen or so articles and reviews that critique the use of English in Africa (accessed 17 May 2024).

² Alliance for Vulnerable Mission, <https://www.vulnerablemission.org/> (accessed 17 May 2024).

³ See <https://www.vulnerablemission.org/>.

⁴ Jim Harries, “A Linguistic Case for the Necessity of Enculturation in Theological and Economic Teaching Based on the ‘Shape of Words’: Including a Case Study Comparing Sub-Saharan Africa with the West,” *Journal of Intercultural Communication* 8, no. 3 (September 2008), <https://immi.se/index.php/intercultural/article/view/Harries2008-3> (accessed 23 May 2024).

⁵ Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Afro-modernity and the New World Order,” in *Producing African Futures: Ritual and Reproduction in a Neoliberal Age*, ed. Brad Weiss (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 329–48.

⁶ Comaroff and Comaroff, “Afro-modernity and the New World Order,” 331.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th ed., ed. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 43.

⁸ T. M. S. Evens, *Anthropology as Ethics: Nondualism and the Conduct of Sacrifice* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2008).

⁹ “René Descartes,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes/> (accessed 23 May 2024).

¹⁰ Evens draws a clear distinction between nondualism and monism. Evens, *Anthropology as Ethics*, 25.

¹¹ Evens, *Anthropology as Ethics*, 69.

¹² Evens, *Anthropology as Ethics*, 69.

¹³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough,” trans. A. C. Miles (Gringley-on-the-Hill, Nottinghamshire: Brynmill, 1979), 6–7e.

¹⁴ Christos Yannaras, “The Distinction Between Essence and Energies and Its Importance for Theology,” *St. Vladimir Theological Quarterly* 19 (1975): 232–45, <https://web.archive.org/web/20081213005322/http://www.geocities.com/trvalentine/orthodox/yannaras.html> (accessed 5 August 2024).

¹⁵ Yannaras, “The Distinction Between Essence and Energies.”

¹⁶ Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough,” 6–7e.

¹⁷ Wittgenstein, “Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough,” 6–7e.

¹⁸ Jim Harries, “Formal Adoption of Wholistic Evaluation of English Is Urgently Needed to Avoid Generation of Racism in the West, and Under-Development in Africa,” in *Revising and Re-Writing Ethics in Social Research for Commoning the Community*, ed. Jahid Siraz Chowdhury, et al. (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2024), 74–92.

¹⁹ To consider that sub-Saharan Africa might have had an “economy” in pre-colonial times is in many ways itself a misnomer. Using Evens’s terminology, nondualists do not build economies as this term is understood in Western English.

²⁰ Jim Harries, “Practising Mission and Development in a Multi-lingual African Context of Jostling for Money and Power,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 43, no. 2 (2019): 152–66.

²¹ See Frank H. Melland, *In Witch Bound Africa: An Account of the Primitive Kaonde Tribe and Their Beliefs* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1923) is the title to Melland’s book about the Kaonde tribe in Zambia. When one realises the degree to which witchcraft is an outcome of envy, one might consider this equivalent to “In Envy Bound Africa,” Helmut Schoeck, *Envy: A Theory of Social Behaviour*, trans. Martin Secker (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1969), 13.

²² This raises the question as to whether the real reason for widespread use of English is to make life easier for Western theological educators, i.e., to attract as many Africans as easily as possible.

²³ In nondualism, the economic and the theological are not distinct categories. The boundary between them is very fuzzy. Nevertheless, I suggest, people’s investing themselves into theological education for the purposes of economic gain remains problematic.

²⁴ Jim Harries, *African Heartbeat: And a Vulnerable Fool* (London: Apostolos, 2018). See, especially, Chapter 17.

²⁵ Jey J. Kanagaraj, “The Poor in the Gospels and the Good News Proclaimed to Them,” *Themelios* 23, no. 1 (October 1997): 40–58, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-poor-in-the-gospels-and-the-good-news-proclaimed-to-them/> (accessed 23 May 2024).

²⁶ Martin Schlag, “The Preferential Option for the Poor and Catholic Social Teaching,” in *Catholic Social Teaching: A Volume of Scholarly Essays*, ed. G. V. Bradley and E. C. Brugger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 468–82.

²⁷ For more on tacit knowing, see Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1983).

Books to Help You Better Understand the Bible

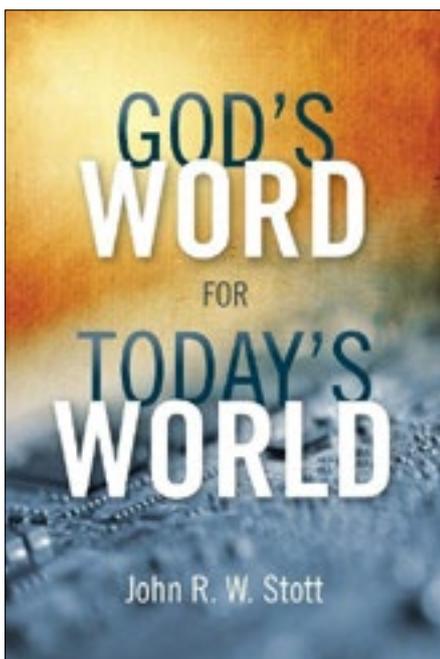
Walter McConnell

Though Christians all recognize that the Bible is God's word for us, if we are honest, we must admit that we don't always find it as clear or easy to understand as we would like it to be. How many times have we come away from our quiet time wondering, "Now, what was that all about?" And how often have friends from church asked us what a certain passage or verse from the Bible means and we found it difficult to give a proper answer? How do we respond when someone preaches a sermon based on Scripture that we feel was taken way out of context and used to promote an idea that really wasn't there? Do we ignore it, complain openly, or what? The fact that things like this happen far more frequently than we would like reminds us of our need to get to know our Bibles better and to provide our church members and leaders with better tools for reading and understanding the Bible themselves.

Answers for many of the questions that we and our church friends have can be found in a good Bible dictionary or a one-volume Bible commentary. If it at all possible, every missionary should have one of each in his or her home language. Having a similar resource in one's ministry language would be a bonus as it may provide clues on how to express difficult concepts in that language. But beyond these basic tools, if we are to develop a big-picture view of the story of the Bible and gain skills in understanding the different literary styles found there we will need to read other books as well. The books introduced below will help you build a better foundation for understanding the Bible and may give you something that you can pass on to others. Some of these books could be used as a text or a source for ideas for teaching a home Bible study that introduces these ideas to people in the church where you worship. Some

of them might be useful in preparing courses for a theological seminary. If you search online, you will discover teaching materials and courses are already available for some of these books that will benefit you or serve as good examples of how you could teach similar ideas in your own setting.

As you read about the books below, may I challenge you to try to determine what stage you are in your personal study of Scripture and choose a book that you believe will best help you progress in your knowledge of God and his word and equip you to teach others also. If none of these books appeals to you, consider what other book you might read that will not only increase your knowledge of the Bible, but bring you into closer relationship with the God who spoke the world into existence and still speaks through his written word to anyone who is willing to listen.



God's Word for Today's World

John Stott (Carlisle: Langham Preaching Resources, 2015)

A simple starting point in getting to know the Bible would be John Stott's *God's Word for Today's World*. In five short chapters, Stott introduces important ideas regarding: (1) God and the Bible; (2) Christ and the Bible; (3) The Holy Spirit and the Bible; (4) The Church and the Bible; and (5) The Christian and the Bible. Each topic strengthens our understanding of how the Trinitarian God revealed and inspired the Bible, what he intended the Bible to do for those who

read it, and how we should respond to it as a church and individuals. Through this book, we learn of our need to worship God and him alone, of his gift to us of salvation through Jesus Christ, and of our duty to obey his will as revealed in the Bible. Whether used as a text for all participants in a small group or simply as a source for ideas for someone who is preparing such a study, this book is an excellent guide for those who want to get to know God's written word.

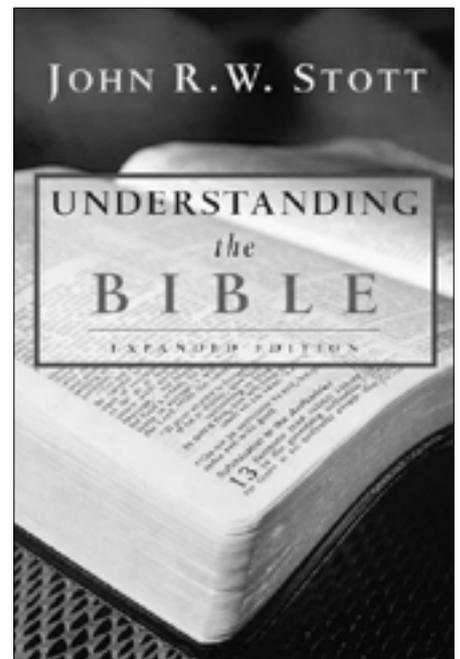
God's Word for Today's World has been (or is being) translated into the following languages: Amharic, Arabic, Bosnia and Herzegovina/Serbia/Croatia, French, German, Hindi, Indonesian, Kannada, Kiswahili, Marathi, Spanish, Tagalog, Tamil, Telugu, and Vietnamese. For more information and links to discussion guides and videos, see <https://langham.org/news-and-updates/new-global-preaching-clubs-resource-celebrates-john-stott/>.

Understanding the Bible **Expanded edition**

John Stott (Grand Rapids: Baker and London: Three's Company, 2001)

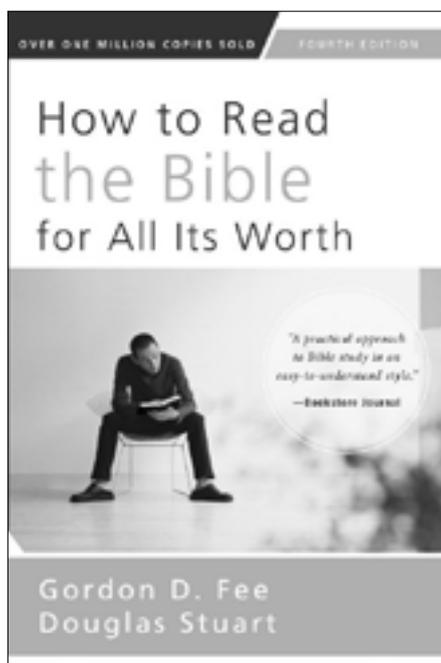
While *God's Word for Today's World* provides a general introduction to the Bible as God's word, *Understanding the Bible* takes us a few steps farther as it explains why the Bible was written, who wrote it, and leads us on a journey through the theological, geographical, religious, and historical world of the text so that we can grasp their impact on its storyline. Overviewing the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation, Stott shows how the story directs us to Jesus, who was both a man of his world and the one who unites all in himself

as the Messiah. Stott then reminds us of what it means for the Bible to be authoritative and lays out principles that help readers interpret it rightly and use it ethically. No one should fear that this is a heavy textbook written for academics. Though seekers and new believers will undoubtedly discover concepts that are unfamiliar as they are distinctly Christian, the book was mainly written to provide students and lay leaders with firm foundations for their faith. If you or others you know need to strengthen your foundations, pick this up.



Other editions:

Chinese: 见证基督: 探求《圣经》的本来面目 / *Jian zheng Jidu: tan qiu sheng jing de ben lai mian mu* (Inner Mongolia People's Publishing House, 2003);
Finnish: *Miten ymmärtäisin Raamattua* (Helsinki: Suomen Evankelisuteriläinen, 1980);
French: *Comprendre la Bible*, Nouvelle éd. révisée (Charols: Éditions Grâce & vérité, 2015);
German: *Die Bibel Verstehen* (Wuppertal: Verlag Bibelsebund, 1975);
Hungarian: *Bibliaismereti alapok* ([Stuttgart]: *Evangeliumi Kiado*, 1988);
Indonesian: *Memahami isi Alkitab* (Jakarta: Persekutuan Pembaca Alkitab, 1984);
Japanese: 聖書理解のためのガイドブック / *Seisho Rikai no tame no Gaidobukku* (Tokyo, 1974);
Korean: 성경연구 입문: 존 스토틀 서거 특별판 / *Seonggyeong yeongu immun* (Seoul: Scripture Union, 1994);
Portuguese: *Entenda a Bíblia* (São Paulo: Mundo Cristão, 2005);
Spanish: *Cómo Comprender la Biblia*, 2nd ed (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Certeza Unida, 2005).



How to Read the Bible for All its Worth **4th edition**

Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014)

This book does such a good job explaining how to read and interpret the Bible according to the literary genre of each part that, although I read it after completing my seminary training, I wished I had read it before and continually encourage others to read it too. The fact that it is now in its fourth edition and continues to be used as a standard text for interpreting biblical genres testifies to its value.

Fee and Stuart begin by instructing us of our need to interpret the Bible accurately if we are to believe and obey it as the words of the living God. Since

they are aware that few readers can use the original languages, they explain why we need to use a good translation (or, as they think would be better, several good translations) and introduce readers to issues involved in the translation process that led to some versions being extremely literal and others being “free” and give guidance on which they think are best.

They then take us through the Bible section by section and genre by genre showing how the basic principles of interpretation are worked out in practice so that we can rightly understand what God wants us to

know and do what he wants us to do. Though written for Bible college and seminary classrooms, it is written in clear English (with no footnotes) that most readers will find engaging. Many readers will find that this book revolutionizes

their reading of God's word. This is definitely a book worth re-reading and recommending to others who desire to develop their skills in Bible reading.

Other editions:

Finnish: *Kirjojen kirja: Avaimia Raamatun tulkintaan* (Kauniainen: Perussanoma, 1996);
 French: *Un Nouveau regard sur la Bible* (Deerfield, FL: Editions Vida, 1990);
 German: *Effektives Bibelstudium*, 3. überarb. Aufl. (Asslar: ICI - Deutsches Büro, 1996) <https://archive.org/details/effektivesbibels0000feeg>;
 Hungarian: *Kétélű kard: a Biblia olvasása és értelmezése* (Budapest: Harmat, 1996);
 Japanese: 聖書を正しく読むために〈総論〉聖書解釈学入門 / *Seisho o tadashiku yomu tame ni soron: Seisho kaishakugaku nyumon* (Inochinokotobasha, 2014);
 Korean: 성경을 어떻게 읽을 것인가 : 성경 해석 지침서 / *Sōnggyōng ūl ōttōk'e ilgūl kōsin'ga: sōnggyōng haesōk chich'imsō* (Seoul: Scripture Union, 1988);
 Polish: *Jak czytać Biblię?* (JR Sztorc, 1982); Portuguese: *Entendes o que lês? Um guia para entender a Bíblia com auxílio da exegese e da hermenêutica*, 3a ed. (Sao Paulo: Vida Nova, 2011);
 Spanish: *La Lectura Eficaz de La Biblia* (Miami, FL: Vida, 2007);
 Vietnamese: *Nguyễn Tác Đức Và Hiểu Kinh Thánh* (Garden Grove, CA: Viện Thần Học Việt Nam, 2002).



Come and See: The Journey of Knowing God through Scripture

Jonathan Pennington (Wheaton: Crossway, 2023)

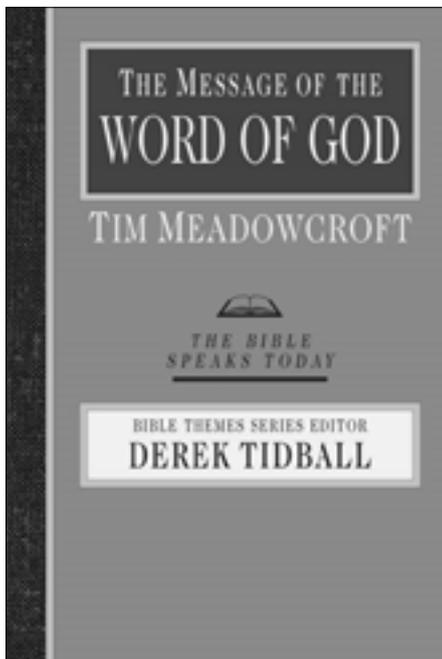
Pennington likens reading Scripture to a road trip that enlightens those who take part about their destination and the way to get there. Though not all readers will readily relate to the road trip analogy, they will quickly understand that the author is calling us to *Come and See* what God has revealed in Scripture using three different reading approaches: an informational reading, a theological reading, and a transformational reading.

When reading for information, we focus on such things as the history behind a text and the literary genre in which it was written to inform our minds about what God wants us to know. Within informational reading, there are “three avenues” to travel: reading *behind the text* (learning about the language, history, and culture of biblical times), *in the text* (focusing on the Bible as literature), and *in front of the text* (understanding how previous generations of believers have understood and applied it).

A theological reading of the Bible recognizes that as our Trinitarian God is main subject of Scripture, we read it to get to know him. This approach also anchors our interpretation in the church's historical understanding of the text so that we don't spin off into our own orbit.

The goal of reading the Bible for transformation is to see God's word change us ever more into his image as people who know and live for him. Reading for personal transformation protects us from only approaching the Bible intellectually.

Come and See is filled with examples based on biblical passages that show the value in the various reading methods and how they benefit us. It also warns us about some mistakes that we can easily fall into if we are not careful. If you need a road map to lead you through the landscape of Scripture, you may find this book extremely helpful.



The Message of the Word of God: The Glory of God Made Known

The Bible Speaks Today

Tim Meadowcroft (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011)

Meadowcroft's *The Message of the Word of God* will appeal to readers who resist thinking about God's word from the perspective of systematic theology, but want to engage what Scripture says about itself in an expositional, almost sermonic, fashion. As the author explains, "the word of God" encompasses more than just the Bible, including nature, the written word, and the living "Word of God"—Jesus Christ (he purposely uses capital W for this). The book is made up of the studies of twenty biblical passages that develop four main propositions: (1) God speaks; (2) God speaks in the written word; (3) God speaks in Christ; and (4) God

speaks today. As the subtitle makes plain, when God speaks, his glory is made known. Beyond this, God's speaking brings together a people—whether Israel or the church—who are given the task of delivering God's word to others. And when God's word is made known, those who hear it should respond with commitment and obedience. While some readers might question the exegesis of a few passages or ask why only these twenty texts were included in the discussion, all will be challenged to think more deeply about what the Bible itself says about God and his word and to obey it to his glory.

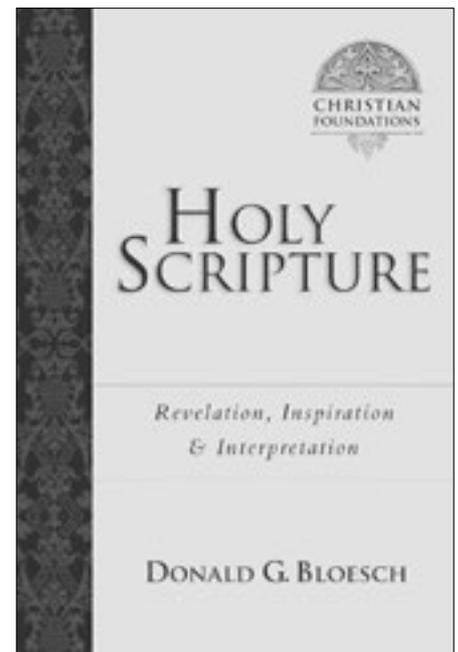
Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration and Interpretation

Christian Foundations

Donald G. Bloesch (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994)

Bloesch's *Holy Scripture* is part of his series on *Christian Foundations*, his systematic theology of the church. The book will therefore be of greatest interest to anyone who wants to read about Scripture from the standpoint of systematic theology though others will surely benefit. Setting his examination of Scripture in the context of errors made from both the left and the right, the author aims to develop a theology of word and Spirit in which the written word becomes the living word as the Holy Spirit illumines our minds to its truths. The concepts of revelation and inspiration that feature prominently in other systematic approaches to Scripture are developed here with a nod to their historical development, how they are variously understood in recent discussions, and how we can improve our thinking about them. Bloesch similarly considers the relation of Scripture to the church and the nature of hermeneutics, with both historical and current options explained. The book concludes with an examination of Rudolf Bultmann's distinctive influence over biblical studies in the

later twentieth century, a discussion of the relationship between the Bible and myth, and reflections on truth from the perspectives of the Bible and philosophy. This introduction should make it clear that *Holy Scripture* is not for the beginner as it requires a broad knowledge of both systematic and historical theology, and the ability to follow Bloesch's personal take on the age-old question of how faith and intellect work together: a faith that is seeking to understand and an intellect that desires to be directed by faith. This said, those who read deeply will be challenged to rethink some issues they felt they were sure of, some they remained uncertain of, and others they hadn't known existed in order to develop a new understanding of how God speaks through his written word as the Holy Spirit gives us the faith to believe it and live it out. While we may not agree with Bloesch on every point, if we seek the Spirit's guidance as we work through the concepts developed, we will grow greatly in our understanding of Scripture and the God who gave it to us.



Editorial

Continued from p.3

preparation and the justice issues at stake if we misunderstand the relationship between culture and preaching.

Phil Nicholson, in the two papers that follow, challenges us to recognize that preaching is a crucial part of the missionary task, particularly if we want to see local churches grow to their full potential. Phil's passion for preaching is borne out by his association with Langham Preaching and OMF's Project Ezra. Along with its other ministries designed to build up the global church, Langham Preaching aims to provide training for preachers in about eighty countries around the world, mainly in areas of special need. The article "Preaching and Mission" situates preaching in the context of the book of Acts and history and introduces Langham's work to train preachers in East Asia. The article "Project Ezra" looks at OMF's program to train members to become better preachers. Its goal is to impart the skills Ezra exhibited through his study, obedience, and teaching of the law. May both missionaries and the local leaders with whom they work gain and use such skills for the benefit of the church.

Larry Dinkins discovered, after trying a highly literate TEE approach for Bible study and a Western approach to preaching, that the Thai were in fact "preferred oral learners" who responded best to the narrative sections of Scripture. Following a major fail during an orality workshop, he went on a quest to understand how best to communicate to concrete relational learners like the Thai. Dinkins has since been involved with around one hundred Simply the Story workshops in ten countries, and has settled on a three-pronged narrative preaching approach that has produced gratifying results with the added benefit of being easily

replicated. His experience and rationale for using this approach may give many missionaries a reason to reconsider whether their approach to preaching or teaching preaching is appropriate in the context where they work.

Like many of us, growing up in a Christian family and church didn't mean that Tina Keller naturally found the Bible or preaching based on it particularly interesting. It was only with time and coming to understand what Christ's atonement did for her personally that her interest in God's word in print and in preaching matured. Based upon personal experience, her article shows the necessity of both "Sound Preaching and Ears that Hear." Living in an age in which we are bombarded by messages of both helpful and dubious quality, she reminds us of the need for those who preach or teach the Bible to ensure that what they say is based upon the Bible and enlightened by the Holy Spirit. And though not everyone will actively preach and teach the Bible, we will all hear others who do and thus need to be prepared to receive God's word for us and do what it says. Keller reminds us that discipleship is more than simply a course to be taken and that both preaching and teaching God's word *and* listening to it and obeying it are crucial elements of Christian discipleship that will help us develop in this life and prepare for the next.

Sometimes, missionaries speak of "empowering" the people they work with. There are, however, serious questions about whether we, as foreigners, should perceive ourselves as having some kind of power that we can bestow upon local people. Through his decades-long service in Africa, Jim Harries has come to understand how the issues involved in this thinking impact our practices in theological education and

the distribution of funds. His solution? Become "vulnerable" by using only local languages to train people for ministry and living at the local level so that it is clear you have nothing to give but service. Vulnerable missionaries will need to stay longer to get a deeper grounding in language and culture. Doing so will ensure that theological educators will not teach courses that simply mirror ones they took at home but provide deep roots for the new soil. And though the article refers to things that Western missionaries need to give up to live and serve in Africa, it equally applies to missionaries from whatever background wherever they serve, particularly if they come from a more affluent or educated background. It may be that this article will give OMF members, who have long spoken of the need to live simple lifestyles, reason to reevaluate their own practice.

As we believe that the Bible is the word of God that should be heard, understood, and obeyed, let us do what we can to ensure that the people we work with understand it rightly so that they can obey it too. This will require us to learn the Bible well in their language. Some years ago, a friend told me that he spent his first home assignment focusing his Bible reading on the translation used by the people he worked with. His example should challenge many of us to spend quality time in the local translation, get to know it, and memorize it so that we can communicate it well, even with those who can't (or won't) read it themselves. Those who have given time to learning the original biblical languages may similarly be challenged to return to their Greek and/or Hebrew and start to get to know it again. This should not be thought of as an academic exercise but as a way to better know God's word so that we can rightly share it with others so that the B-I-B-L-E won't just be *the book for me*, but that it will become *the book for them* too.

40 Questions about the Great Commission

By Daniel L. Akin, Benjamin L. Merkle, and George G. Robinson
Grand Rapids: Kregel. 2020. ISBN 9780825444487. 360pp.

Reviewed by Nathan Keller



The word “Trinity” is not found anywhere within the biblical text. Neither is the often written-about and taught-about label, “The Great Commission.”

What is the Great Commission?

How has the Great Commission been interpreted in history?

How does the Old Testament relate to the Great Commission?

How do the Epistles of the New Testament relate to the Great Commission?

These are just a few of the forty questions that *40 Questions About the Great Commission* asks and then answers.

The three authors are all professors at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. Daniel Akin, president of the seminary, wrote Part One (General Questions about the Great Commission) and Part Two (Historical Questions about the Great

Commission). Benjamin Merkle, professor of New Testament and Greek, wrote most of Part Three (Exegetical Questions about the Great Commission) and most of Part Four (Biblical-Theological Questions about the Great Commission). George Robinson, associate professor of missions and evangelism, wrote Part Five (Practical-Missiological Questions about the Great Commission).

This book is very informative. In reading through it, I became more convinced that what we refer to as “The Great Commission” should not be limited to the last section of the Gospel of Matthew. In the first chapter of the book, Akin writes:

Matthew 28:18–20 is a crucial part of the Great Commission. But, our understanding of the “Great Commission” must be broadened beyond Matthew’s final verses. Mark 13:10, Luke 24:46–49, John 20:19–23, and Acts 1:8 each record commissions by Jesus to spread the gospel. (21)

This book has many strengths, one of which is its overall structure. It is organized in such a way that it can be read straight through (my strong recommendation) or treated as a reference book related to any number of topics or themes raised by the forty questions.

Another strength is the organization of the content within each of the short chapters. All but two of the chapters are less than ten pages long, and each includes a concise summary of the well-organized contents within, followed by a set of reflection questions that can be used either for individual or group purposes.

Additionally, though the chapters are short, they are well written and therefore easy to read. This allows complex concepts to become easier to

understand. For readers who choose to explore, footnotes contain both detailed information and references to other works.

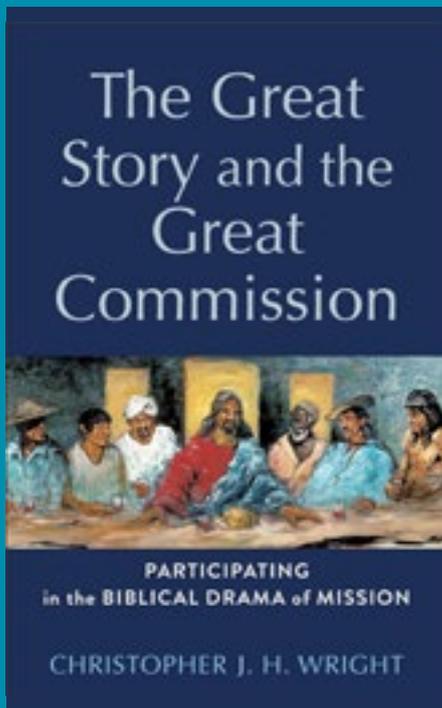
There are only two possible limitations I can think of when it comes to this book. The first is that, due to multiple writers and theme-oriented chapters, there is some repetition of material. Some readers may find this unnecessary, whereas other readers may find that it produces greater retention of the information presented.

Secondly, because all three writers teach at the same denominational seminary, some readers may not appreciate the lack of theological diversity presented in the book. On the flip side, other readers may relish that the book is written from a conservative, evangelical theological perspective shared among many mission societies and denominations.

Ultimately, *40 Questions about the Great Commission* is a reminder of what Jesus has commissioned his disciples to do. In the summary of the last chapter, Robinson writes,

In conclusion, Jesus’s famous last words contain a simple, but sacrificial command to make disciples of every kind of people in every place. But he couches that command between two very precious and powerful promises: (1) we join God on mission empowered by Jesus’s all-encompassing authority; (2) we join God on mission comforted by Jesus’s never-ending presence. (331)

I highly recommend this book for those who want to think historically, biblically, theologically, and methodologically about the Great Commission that all disciples of Jesus are called to play a part in. This is one of the best biblical studies books I have ever read. You may come to the same conclusion after reading it too.



The Great Story and the Great Commission: Participating in the Biblical Drama of Mission

By Christopher J. H. Wright, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023.
ISBN: 9781540968869. 156pp.

Reviewed by Nathan Keller

*I love to tell the story of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love.
I love to tell the story because I know it's true;
It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.*

The words of this great hymn, penned by Katherine Hankey in 1866, speak of telling the story of God's redemption of sinful mankind through Jesus. What a wonderful story to tell!

In *The Great Story and the Great Commission*, Chris Wright explains how the whole Bible is one great story, a grand narrative of God's mission to the world. It is a mission in which the church and its members play an active role.

The author writes, "We are seeking to express the relationship between the great story and the Great Commission, exploring a missional hermeneutic that is grounded in reading the Bible as one whole narrative that renders to us the mission of God and summons us to play our part in it" (128).

The first half of the book tells "The Great Story" of the Bible. The presentation is not one linked to dispensations or covenants, but rather to a drama in seven acts, through the lens of the missional hermeneutic Wright describes in chapter one. The seven acts of this story are *Creation, Rebellion, Promise, Christ, Mission, Judgment*, and *New Creation*.

The second half of the book details the five marks of mission that the church is to undertake in its current act of *Mission*, under the direction of our Lord Jesus and his charge of mission, namely through the Great Commission. These five acts can be classified into three different categories. Christians are to engage in ministries of *evangelism* and *teaching* (Building the Church), *justice* and *compassion* (Serving Society), and *creation responsibility* (Ruling Over and Caring for Creation).

This book has many strengths, one of which is a thorough explanation of what a missional hermeneutic is and how the entirety of the Bible can be read through its lens.

Another strength of the book is the rich application for the church. The five marks of mission are not only labels; they are also specific calls for action. Wright shows how God's mission throughout the Bible story has included all five of these marks of mission and how God has involved his people in these five marks throughout the story, both in the past and in the part the church plays today.

Another strength of the book is the use of simple graphics that help to explain both the seven acts of the drama of the Great Story and the five marks of mission that Christians are to engage in.

There are two critiques I have of the book. The first is one of hermeneutics. The "five marks" paradigm used in the book (though modified in its wording) was developed in the 1980s by the church denomination that Wright is associated with. In the book's explanation of the Great Commission, it seems to me that Wright is reading these "five marks" into the Great Commission passages rather than generating the marks of mission from the passages themselves.

The second critique I have is the unbalanced weight given in the book to one of the "five marks" of mission. One chapter is given to the two marks of *evangelism* and *teaching*, one chapter is given to the two marks of *compassion* and *justice*, but two chapters are given to the one mark of *creation responsibility*. Is the imbalance due to Wright's desire to advance an apologetic for why creation care should be a mark of Christian mission?

Noting the two critiques above, I still highly recommend this book to be read by those who want to participate in God's mission to the world. There is so much missional, biblical, and practical depth in this small book written by a significant contributor to mission thinking in our current generation. May we continue to be reflective as we participate in God's mission.