The Role of Preaching in Improving Biblical Literacy in the Church
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I recall sitting in the waiting room of a central Kentucky doctor’s office in the mid-1980’s, listening to two women stridently debate whether or not a Christian should eat fish that has no scales. The more they talked, the more heated their conversation grew, and the more animated they were, the more amused I became.

Several details became apparent, and even explicit, in their ensuing discussion. First, one of the ladies was a Jehovah’s Witness and the other a Pentecostal Christian. Second, both of them had a general understanding of Old Testament laws and a familiarity with the Scriptures. Third, although they lacked a doctrinal grid by which to argue the behavioral mandates imposed by their churches’ interpretations, they each took the Scriptures seriously. They felt obligated to live out what they understood to be the teaching of the Bible. Neither of them was able to articulate why those laws were either still binding or abrogated, but they agreed that the Bible was the ultimate guide for human behavior because they were both appealing to biblical texts.

I deliberated whether or not to enter the fray and disclose that I was a Baptist youth pastor and, therefore, knowledgeable about these things. The fascinating part was everyone else in the waiting room began to volunteer their opinions. In fact, a few of them were able to explain concepts of law and grace and led the others in the room to side against the woman to whom catfish was anathema.

Now, thirty years later, though I live in the same area, I can hardly imagine hearing that conversation in a public place. Frankly, I used to hear many conversations like that in Kentucky during the 1980’s. Like other Bible Belt states, Kentucky seemed to have a population with a general, if inchoate, belief about the truth of the Bible and the divinity of Jesus Christ. I frequently encountered people who knew enough about the Bible to employ it as a reference point for morality or cultural narratives. If “Bible” were a language, many Americans of past generations were at least conversant in the basics. Referring to it variously as “the good book,” the “Holy Bible,” or even the “Word of God,” most people seemed to have a reverence and respect for the Bible, even if they were not following its precepts.

The Bible was, after all, prominent in its effect on 20th Century culture. Americans had grown up watching Cecil B. DeMille’s epic movies, The Ten Commandments and Ben-Hur. They may also have seen The Robe or Samson and Delilah, as well as many other movies whose storylines were taken directly from biblical narratives. Novels recast biblical narratives in modern settings. One example was Elia Kazan’s adaptation of John Steinbeck’s East of Eden, made even more famous by one of James Dean’s few film performances. Many baby boomers, especially in the American south, grew up hearing a passage of scripture every morning before reciting the Lord’s prayer in their public school classroom—even after the 1962 Engel vs. Vitale Supreme Court decision ruled state-supported prayer unconstitutional.
The peculiarities of history and geography are not the only reasons Americans have enjoyed a biblical literacy. The Bible is inarguably the most influential book in the world, particularly in the West. Whether reading William Faulkner, gazing at one of Rembrandt’s paintings, visiting the Holocaust museum, making sense of conflict in the Middle East, or attending a Shakespeare play, without a knowledge of the Bible one simply misses much of the historical context of world events or the intended meaning carried by rich biblical allusion in art and literature. Knowledge of the Bible has previously endowed the western world and the near east with a rich array of cultural themes and narratives from which we have made sense of our own story. Today, the ability to relate to the stories and content of the Bible is becoming rare.

As important as knowing the Bible may be to culture, for the Christian, the Bible is life. One cannot know Christ apart from God’s revelation of Him in the Bible. One could not know of God’s work in history to redeem His people apart from knowing the Bible. Churches have neither right nor reason to exist apart from belief and instruction in the Word of God. As lamentable as one might find the cultural drift from this biblical heritage, the unfamiliarity of the average church member is undeniably worse. Educated and informed unbelievers should know the basic themes of the Bible to appreciate history, art, and culture, but persons who profess faith in Christ, who have staked their eternal destiny on scriptural truth, should immerse themselves in the fertile substance of Scripture as a matter of course.

Why then, if a thorough education requires it and a Christian worldview stands on it, are typical Christians so unconcerned with their distressing ignorance of the content of the Bible? They sometimes seem to possess little more than an inaccurate knowledge of the Christmas narrative and a distorted emotional understanding of the crucifixion. They know a little about the Exodus, thanks to Hollywood, but they know nothing about the Exile, one of the most significant epochs in the Old Testament. They’ve heard of David, but not Rehoboam. They may know the Jesus who said “Judge not,” but they are ignorant of the Jesus who compared a Gentile woman to a dog.

Admittedly, this problem is not new. A recent study disputes that Christians today are any more biblically ignorant than their parents’ generation, but coupled with trends of declining conversions, baptisms, and membership, one cannot reasonably argue the church has not lost ground overall when it comes to biblical literacy.

Pastors Matter

Pastors might be justifiably overwhelmed by parishioners’ obliviousness to the scriptures, but in some ways, they largely share in the blame. A cursory scan of the largest churches and television ministries today reveals a troubling indication that preaching that seems to garner the largest audiences is usually little more than a baptized motivational presentation with a thin veneer of Christian truth. Joel Osteen, for example, has a worldwide television program and one of the largest churches in America, yet one can search his sermons in vain to find any effort at doctrinal preaching or a thorough exegesis of a passage. In spite of the mantra about
the Bible with which he opens every sermon, he rarely spends any time in a biblical text. Instead, he focuses on the need for his audience to have faith and confidence to achieve all God wants them to accomplish.

Ed Young, Jr. is far better known for his elaborate object lessons and antics—like having a Porsche on the platform and preaching about the hidden baggage in the trunk, or his notorious seven days on the roof in a bed with his wife for the purpose of challenging his married church members to have sex every day for a month. He has become known for the growth of his church, his wealthy lifestyle, and his views on sex, but he is not known as an expositor or exegete.

Andy Stanley is rightly admired and emulated for his brilliance as a communicator, but no one accuses him of teaching the Bible systematically. In fact, even when he preached at the Southern Baptist Pastors Conference in 2009, he preached not from the Bible but from five aphorisms that hang on the wall of his study. One of the five was a verse of Scripture.

Mega-church pastors, however, are not to blame for the biblical unfamiliarity of contemporary Christianity, nor did comfort with a focus on something other than Scripture begin with them. Early in the 20th Century, Harry Emerson Fosdick popularized a view of preaching as the extension of counseling rather than exposition of the biblical text. In many places he repeated some variation of his belief that “Preaching is personal counseling on a group basis” or simply “counseling from the pulpit.” In a sad irony, many preachers whom he would have labeled as fundamentalists and opposed because of their belief in the inerrancy and inspiration of Scripture have now capitulated to his view of preaching.

However insightful and helpful such therapeutic preaching may be, it does not point people to the Bible nor encourage them to study it for themselves. The pastor may be a congregational therapist, or cheerleader, or even a very capable leader, but the people under his tutelage are no more biblically literate because of it. What good is a belief in the doctrine of inspiration if one does not feel the need to preach the very book God inspired?

Christian bookstores, many deceptively named, reflect this trend away from the study of the Bible and have largely become Christian curio shops instead of primarily purveyors of books. One can more easily find a framed illustrated rendition of “Footprints in the Sand” than Augustine’s Confessions. Christian music, decorations, greeting cards, and art often occupy more display space than books. A Christian bookstore that actually focuses on presenting books—books about the Bible itself—is like a rare jewel in a box of child’s trinkets.

To paraphrase Luther, “Here we stand. We can do none else.” No longer enjoying the cultural advantage of their predecessors, preachers in North America find themselves ministering in an increasingly skeptical culture to uninformed congregations more accustomed to entertainment than exposition. They expect their pastors to perform like the celebrity preachers they see on television. Feeling the pressure to conform, many pastors follow suit and abandon any confidence they once may have had in the sheer power of the Word to transform lives. Consequently, many believers never hear the challenge to read and study the Bible or see it modeled by an engaging pastor.
Faithful expository preaching alone cannot solve the problem of biblical illiteracy in our churches, but the problem will not be solved without faithful expository preaching. One can hardly imagine that the spiritual level of any congregation will rise much higher than the level of the preaching. Biblical literacy cannot be regained without biblical leadership.

Undeniably the problem is complex and has many contributing factors, but what part of the crisis can be attributed to and, therefore, corrected by preachers? What role can preaching take in getting Christians to know and love the Word of God?

**Longevity Matters**

Perhaps the single most significant factor in the failure of pastoral leadership is the short duration of most pastorates. According to George Barna, “The average tenure of a pastor in Protestant churches has declined to just 4 years—even though studies consistently show that pastors experience their most productive and influential ministry in years 5 through 14 of their pastorate.” This lack of longevity doubtless contributes to myriad difficulties for the local church. The discontinuity of leadership and consequent inability to build trust and credibility are overwhelming obstacles to accomplishing significant Kingdom goals.

Aristotle first divided oratory into three distinct categories, each of which was necessary to communicate effectively and persuade the audience: *logos* (the substance and logic used to support a claim) *pathos* (the emotional and motivational appeal and passion), and *ethos* (the speaker’s authority and trustworthiness). These divisions still provide a framework for contemporary studies on oratory in general and preaching in particular. While logos and pathos can be learned, ethos must be earned. How can a preacher enjoy trust when he isn’t in the church long enough to secure it?

No matter how much seminary education and brilliant pulpit skill a preacher may have, he cannot quickly and easily gain credibility. Just as character has no shortcuts, neither does integrity. As public speaking expert Bert Decker wrote, “You have to be believed to be heard.” Congregants have to walk with a pastor long enough to be convinced of his character, to see if he practices at home what he preaches in the pulpit. No pastor can project the impression to his congregation that he is worth being heard based on his elected position alone. He must have moral authority in addition to being likable and worthy of respect. The more the congregation sees its pastor live a godly life and respond well to its pressures and tragedies, the more they will believe the gospel he preaches.

An additional and related challenge is surely a lack of consistent and systematic teaching of the Bible. When pastors come and go with each presidential election cycle, congregants never hear the *entire* Bible preached. Indeed, they probably do not encounter even a representative sample of all parts of it. Without a pastor’s strategic and intentional plan to declare the whole counsel of Scripture over time, churches are as likely to get a balanced biblical diet as a homeless man searching for food in dumpsters.
Only a shepherd who walks through a significant portion of life while sharing the Word can feed his people a balanced scriptural diet. Living out the Word of God in community has the two-fold benefit of adding to the pastor’s credibility and authority (provided he actually earns it, of course). It also gives the pastor insight as to how and when and in what measure to speak the Word into the lives of his congregants in tandem with their genuine struggles and life challenges.

Ideally, a pastor with a longer tenure has a master plan to introduce his congregation not only to the individual texts of Scripture, but also to the metanarrative of redemption. Therefore, they read the Bible as a unified whole that points to God’s redemptive work in Christ. The pastor must not only have an ambition of introducing his church to the story of Esther, for example, but also desire to show them how Esther fits into God’s plan to redeem a people for Himself. As he preaches any book or passage, the pastor must frequently remind his listeners of that redemptive-historical framework, and help them learn how each passage fits within it.

This comprehensive strategy over a long time not only teaches the facts of the Bible, but also its unity and cohesion. Believers are far more likely to be excited by Scripture texts when they see them as a piece of a larger puzzle rather than as isolated and discrete units. Even difficult texts grow more interesting, as well as easier to understand.

A helpful paradigm for pastors to employ is to present the story of the Bible as pointing to Jesus Christ in five movements. These five movements can be labeled in five pairs of God’s action and man’s condition or response: 1) God’s creation of the universe through Christ and the subsequent fall of humanity in Adam and Eve; 2) God’s promise of a coming deliverer and Messiah who would redeem his people even in their constant depravity and ongoing disobedience to God’s law; 3) The fulfillment of God’s promise in the Christ event—his incarnation, sinless life, substitutionary death, and victorious resurrection—and the redemption of his people through repentance and faith; 4) the establishment of Christ’s church for the propagation of the gospel message and the discipleship of believers through teaching the Word of God; and 5) Jesus’ bodily return to establish His physical rule over all creation and the final redemption and restoration of his people to a greater paradise than Adam and Eve lost.

A simple way to explain this concept is to point out that the entire Bible is ultimately about Jesus, but in different perspectives. Much of the Old Testament looks forward to the work of Christ, explaining why his redemptive work was needed so desperately. Most New Testament texts reveal the work of Christ in his life, death, and resurrection, or prophesy the future consummation that establishes perfect justice and peace.

When a pastor teaches this grand sweep of history and how every book of the Bible fits into this storyline, he inculcates an appreciation of God’s redemptive work, his sovereignty, and his love in spite of human sinfulness. Furthermore, such preaching moves the listener to see that, even though the text under consideration was written thousands of years ago, its primary focus is the future rather than the past. Since the consummation of all of Scripture’s witness is yet to come, the Bible is more a book about the future than about the past, more anticipation than antiquity.
A sense of longing pervades every biblical epoch since the fall, and should permeate pastoral preaching as well.

The longevity of a pastor enables him to plan his preaching to maximize not only biblical literacy, but also biblical understanding. Alternating preaching between Old and New Testaments, law and grace, gospel and epistle, history and prophecy, the long-term pastor knows what his congregation has already heard and what they yet need to hear. In addition, he knows enough about his people to know what he must emphasize or on what he should spend more time. Only a pastor who has years with the same congregation can systematically change textual lens – sometimes looking closely at the constituent parts of the text with a magnifying glass, sometimes seeing the overall book with a fish-eye lens.

Getting the sense of what the congregation knows and what they still need to learn, coupled with the homiletical skill to alternate different depths of analysis and exposition, takes years. Yet this ability is surely one key factor in making a congregation more knowledgeable about the Bible.

Way back in 1922, Fosdick famously referred to the doctrine of blood atonement as “slaughterhouse religion” and “pre-civilized barbarity.” When he wrote those words, he did so as an avowed liberal. His criticism was aimed squarely at the “fundamentalists.” One of his most famous sermons, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” directly challenged the historicity of biblical miracles, the virgin birth, the second coming, and the penal substitutionary atonement.

One can understand why a preacher who disbelieves the supernatural elements of the Bible would refuse to preach it systematically and thoroughly. Robust Biblical literacy is not beneficial, much less essential, in such a worldview. In recent years, however, the challenge to conservative churches and individuals who espouse a belief in the literal truth of the Bible has come less from liberalism than from pragmatism.

At some point during the seeker-friendly frenzy, some Christian thinkers became convinced that the church in general and preachers in particular needed to change the way they talked about biblical concepts. Preachers were advised not to mention the blood sacrifice, the satisfaction element of the atonement, passages of the Old Testament that could be labeled as genocide, or anything that could be construed as politically incorrect. Consequently, preaching subtly became more focused on the sensibilities of the audience than on the content of the text. Ironically, at the same time preachers were avoiding these topics, popular culture was relishing them in stories like Interview with a Vampire, True Blood, and Vampire Diaries.

The culture is very comfortable with themes of redemption, atonement, sacrifice, and substitution. Their real objection is to the Christ of Scripture, not to the themes. Pastors must not fear to preach the difficult parts and spend all their time in the parts of the Bible that are most familiar or easiest to explain. Congregants are often thrilled when a pastor pushes beyond his natural comfort zone and preaches texts that seem strange and foreign.

Additionally, preachers should use biblical stories as illustrations of other passages. Though other illustrations are permissible and even helpful, biblical illustrations and allusions contribute to the goal of displaying the unity and beauty
of God’s perfect revelation. The more God’s people know of the Bible, the more they will love the Bible. In light of Paul’s statement that all Scripture is profitable (2 Tim. 3:16), preachers should strive to show the profitability of every passage they preach and how each fits into God’s overall redemptive work to redeem a people for Himself.

**Textual Dependence Matters**

Still another remedy for biblical illiteracy in the church is renewal of a belief in biblical authority. If indeed the Bible is God’s Word, His perfect revelation of Himself through Jesus Christ and His redemptive work, then nothing can substitute for it. Nothing else can meet the deepest human needs. Pastors must preach the Bible not only because their people need to be more biblically literate, but also because they have nothing else to give them.

This commitment to preach the Bible alone means a commitment to preach the Word unadulterated and in context with a goal of revealing the original authorial intent. A key principle for any pastor to remember is that the folks in the pew will handle the Bible as they have seen it modeled in the pulpit. That pastor who lifts verses of out context and infuses them with his own meaning will ultimately become the victim of parishioners who quote the Bible out of context in order to support their personal views. The most well-intentioned abuse of Scripture is still an abuse of Scripture and gives permission to others to do the same.

Expository preaching, more a philosophy than a method or a style, is that manner of preaching committed to explaining the text in its context through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of the passage. Though an expositor may adopt many different styles and sermonic devices within his sermon, his goal remains the same regardless: to teach the meaning of the text to his congregants. Nothing will impact a congregation’s knowledge of the Bible more than the consistent and thorough expository sermons of a pastor.

Sometimes pastors are so impacted by a book they read or some insight they gain that they are tempted to preach it instead of the Bible. Preachers must evade the temptation to preach a sermon or a series that is more about someone’s book about the Bible than about the Bible itself.

The pulpit is not the place for one’s general reflections on the injustice in the world and why Christians need to pray and be involved. As true as that may be, as laudable as the sentiment, it still comes across as little more than a preacher’s opinion when not contextually and authentically revealed in a specific text.

While social and political challenges change with the vicissitudes of human existence, God’s Word is settled forever in the heavens and will not pass away. The headlines of the day may be urgent, but the deepest need of humanity for a relationship with God through Jesus Christ is more pressing. Biblical preaching provides something of eternal significance rather than mere culturally relevance.

**Preaching Matters**

As essential as biblical content is, the sweetest truths wrapped in bad sermon delivery will not reach their intended target nor have the desired effect. While the
Holy Spirit can use anyone and anything He chooses, He rarely uses bad preaching to accomplish much. Many hours in study and sermon preparation have been wasted by a complete lack of attention to sermon delivery.

No one believed in God’s sovereignty more than Jonathan Edwards or Charles Spurgeon, but both of them wrote extensively on effective and passionate sermon delivery. The doctrine of God’s sovereignty provides no refuge for the lazy preacher or the one who uses his introverted or uncomfortable personality as an excuse. One’s personality is never an acceptable excuse for late mortgage payments, bad child rearing, or unsafe driving, and neither should it be an adequate justification for bad preaching. If a pastor wants his people to be passionate about the Word of God, he had better present it passionately.

Homiletical dullness betrays spiritual dryness. The more intimate and fervent knowledge a pastor has of the text, the more passionately he will preach in the pulpit. If the preacher isn’t excited about the Word of God, the congregation will certainly not be. Ask any person to recall the best teachers they ever had and they will invariably talk about that teacher’s passion, not merely his or her knowledge of the subject. Clearly, the content of the text and of the sermon has preeminence, but having the truth demands an engaging and enthusiastic delivery.

**Conclusion**

God’s complaint to Hosea that his people were destroyed for lack of knowledge rings all too true today. The level of biblical illiteracy in the North American culture and in its churches has reached alarming levels. While Christians must take personal responsibility for knowing God’s Word, preachers have a unique and essential role in the biblical education of God’s people.

Preachers who desire to see their congregations know and love the Word of God need to make three primary commitments. First, they must commit to stay connected with a congregation of believers for a lengthy time. Only over the course of years can a pastor strategically and systematically teach the whole counsel of God as he walks in through life in community with a church. Furthermore, the pastor should locate his preaching in the redemptive-historical framework of God’s work to redeem a people to himself through Jesus Christ.

The second commitment that will help reverse the trend of biblical illiteracy among Christians is for a pastor to dedicate his preaching to true biblical content, specifically to expository preaching. Only through the historical, grammatical, and literary preaching of a passage in its context can people truly understand the author’s intent and learn the meaning of Scripture.

Finally, the preacher must be committed to engaging and passionate delivery of his sermons. He cannot expect his congregants to be more excited to learn than he is to preach. His preaching should demonstrate his commitment to the life-changing power and authority of the Word by the manner in which he delivers it as well as its content. Pastors must devote their lives to preaching the inspired text of Scripture in a manner that connects with the flock with which they are sharing their lives. Only then will God’s people be inspired and challenged to learn the truths, stories, and applications of the Bible.
Religion

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intent through the human author and his intent, and if a more direct or fuller messianic reference is warranted, the Holy Spirit reveals that in the New Testament (i.e. Hosea 11:1 and Matthew 2:13-15). The fact that two or more preachers with the same Christo-centric view of preaching could preach the same passage and yet find different references to Christ indicates a problem. The preacher is safe to preach Christ within the motifs and themes of Scripture or where the Holy Spirit, through subsequent biblical revelation, explicitly shows him.