Preach *the* Word

Vincent Cheung

PO Box 15662, Boston, MA 02215, USA
http://www.vincentcheung.com

CONTENTS

PREFACE

Preach the Word was originally a continuous essay on preaching and education. This being so, it may be apparent that each chapter follows closely after the previous one. Dividing the essay into chapters risks compromising the sense of continuity; nevertheless, I have divided the text to make it easier to read.

The essay is structured around 2 Timothy 4:1-3, and discusses Christian preaching and education. In the process, it criticizes secular theories on learning methods, and calls for a comprehensive teaching and writing ministry from preachers of the gospel. It is my desire that this work will awake the preacher as to the seriousness of his task, and the believer as to his responsibility to study the words of Scripture with all diligence and reverence.

1. THE DIVINE MANDATE

Invoking deity to witness a formal commission or oath is serious business, and therefore we are to anticipate a duty of the most sacred nature when Paul begins the final chapter of 2 Timothy with the words, "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge…" (2 Timothy 4:1). Whatever the next words may be, it is certain that anyone who fears God and respects apostolic authority has come to full alert after reading such a solemn preface.

This charge is given "in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus," causing Timothy to become acutely aware of God's scrutinizing his thoughts and actions as he receives and carries out the oath about to be spoken over him. Bringing a christological focus to the invocation of deity, Paul designates Christ as the one who "will judge the living and the dead." The text thus reminds Timothy that he stands accountable to Christ in his function as the judge of all, and puts him under this solemn oath by "his appearing" and by "his kingdom." These terms resonate with the eschatological motif present in this second letter to Timothy.

Saying that Christ will "judge the living and the dead" had become a familiar "semicreedal formula"[1] early in church history. For example, *The Epistle of Barnabas* contains the following statement: "Though the Son of God was the divine Lord, and the future *Judge of living and dead* alike, yet nevertheless He suffered, in order that His affliction might win life for us."[2] Polycarp, who according to tradition was a disciple of John, wrote to the Philippians saying, "So gird up your loins now and serve God in fear and sincerity…put your trust in Him who raised our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, and gave Him glory and a seat at His own right hand. All things in heaven and earth have been made subject to Him…He comes to *judge the living and the dead*…"[3] In addition, the Apostles' Creed affirms, "He will come to judge the living and the dead."

Christ will judge both those who are alive at "his appearing," as well as those who have died prior to that time, and who will be raised for judgment. No one escapes his authority and rule – all are accountable to Christ for what they believe and do, even when they deny this at the present.

At the least, we must say that such an appeal to the divine witness does not occur casually, but is reserved for only matters of utmost importance and urgency. Knowing all

---

[1] Gordon D. Fee, *New International Biblical Commentary: 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1988; p. 284.
[2] *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*; New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1987; p. 167.
[3] Ibid., p. 119.

of this causes Timothy to take what follows seriously, and this is also how we must consider the charge Paul gives to Timothy in the next verse.

2. PREACH THE WORD

Immediately following the invocation of God as witness, verse 2 says, "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction." Having created an eager expectation and even some apprehension in the reader's mind, Paul announces what it is that he deems so important. "Preach the Word," he says. No doubt the mindset common in today's professing Christians rebels against such a command, that the aged apostle might dare suggest that the verbal communication of biblical truths is the supreme ministry. We must therefore take time to absorb the meaning and implications of what it is to preach.

A full analysis of the word translated *preach* may necessitate a discussion more lengthy than is desirable in this setting. *Kittel* has done such a study, but I am opposed to several major claims in its extensive article.[4] Thayer's "to proclaim after the manner of a herald"[5] is standard, but does not mean much to those who fail to understand what *proclaim* and *herald* imply.

Kenneth Wuest explains: "At once [the word] called to [Timothy's] mind the Imperial Herald, spokesman of the Emperor, proclaiming in the formal, grave, and authoritative manner which must be listened to, the message which the Emperor gave him to announce…This should be the pattern for the preacher today. His preaching should be characterized by that dignity which comes from the consciousness of the fact that he is an official herald of the King of kings. It should be accompanied by that note of authority which will command the respect, careful attention, and proper reaction of the listeners. There is no place for clowning in the pulpit of Jesus Christ."[6]

This is an excellent general description of preaching, and foreshadows some of what I will say in the following pages. However, I intend to break from the confines of what is strictly meant by the term in this study. I will instead go by what is commonly meant by the word *preach* as pertaining to its English usage. This is not poor form if admitted explicitly, and it is done so that I may expound in a general way on all that is meant when we refer to preaching, teaching, and education.

Didaskalia from the Greek is rendered *teaching* in 1 Timothy 5:17, and one may discuss its specific meaning as opposed to that designated by *preach*. Without being ignorant of the distinctions between these and other related words, our study will continue with the

---

[4] Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. 3*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965; p. 697-714.
[5] Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2002 (original: 1896); p. 346.
[6] Kenneth S. Wuest, *The Pastoral Epistles in the Greek New Testament*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999 (original: 1952), p. 154.

whole of Christian instruction in mind, whether preaching or teaching. In other words, I am interested in discussing what is common to the whole scope of Christian instructions. This grants us opportunity to introduce words such as *sermons* and *lectures* as well. The reader may consider this as using 2 Timothy 4:2 as a departure point to discuss several broad issues that apply to all Christian discourses.

Many regard a sermon as different from a lecture. The former is what one hears at church from the preacher – the rhetorical structure it follows, the content it is invested with, and the intent based on which it is delivered, are all very different from a lecture. Sermons do not, and we think should not, resemble even the lectures delivered in Christian seminaries. In seminaries, professors *lecture* to their students so that they may in the future *preach* to their congregations. Some may add that lectures tend to be boring, while sermons can at least occasionally be interesting, and they are interesting to the extent that they do not resemble theological lectures. However, this distinction is false, and perpetuates shallow thinking in congregations as well as the anti-intellectualistic mentality that seeks to give it justification.

Since I will be interacting with a point Jay Adams makes in his *Preaching with Purpose*, we should first allow him to define his use of the word *preaching*. The explanation is useful in illustrating something stated just above, and therefore I will quote him at some length:

> Strictly speaking, the principal biblical words translated "preaching" do not correspond exactly to that activity to which we affix the label. They are somewhat narrower in scope. These words, *kerusso* and *euangelizo*, are used in the New Testament to describe "heralding" and "announcing the gospel." They refer to evangelistic activities. The former always has to do with public proclamation of the good news, while the latter may be used to describe making the gospel known to either unsaved groups or individuals…
>
> On the other hand, the word *didasko*, translated "to teach," more nearly corresponds to our modern use of the word preach, and has to do with the proclamation of truth among those who already believe the gospel…Though at times *didasko* seems also to be limited to evangelistic speaking, and occasionally it is possible that *kerusso* may refer to preaching to the saints…[7]
>
> There are, then, two kinds of preaching (because of a deeply impressed use of the English word I shall use the term "preaching" to cover both evangelistic and pastoral speaking): evangelistic preaching (heralding,

[7] Adams cites our text, 2 Timothy 4:2, as an instance where *kerusso* means the "preaching" that is directed to believers. The verse not only refers to evangelistic preaching, since the context dictates otherwise.

announcing the good news) and pastoral or edificational preaching (teaching).[8]

This not only provides us with Adams' understanding of the biblical use of the terms, but also lends justification to our present procedure, which is to discuss preaching in general as referring to all Christian orations – whether for evangelistic purposes, or to instruct and edify believers.

Then Adams explains the difference between lecturing and preaching this way: "[In lecturing] the preacher does a good job of considering the historical-grammatical exegesis of the preaching passage, considers it theologically and rhetorically, and then – simply tells his congregation what it means. His response, and consequently theirs as well, is to say, 'Well, now I understand it,' and that's that! That is not preaching. True preaching does all of the above, but it also identifies the *telos* (purpose) of the passage, builds the message around it, and calls on the congregation for a response that is appropriate to it. It works for change."[9]

It will be instructive to see what is wrong with the above. Adams claims that lectures aim to give understanding, while preaching *both* gives understanding and "works for change." I challenge this way of distinguishing between the two since he ignores the ordinary meanings of both English words, constructs his own definitions, and presents them again to show up their difference.

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary[10] defines the word *preach* as "to deliver a sermon," and by *sermon* it means, "a religious discourse delivered in public usually by a clergyman as a part of a worship service." It then defines *lecture* as, "a discourse given before an audience or class especially for instruction." According to these definitions, a *sermon* is merely a *lecture* with religious intent and content, thus making the former a subset of the latter, and not a different type of speech altogether. Adams, therefore, merely imposes upon us his private definitions of these terms.

Also, note that even when the preacher tells the congregation what the text means in a lecture, Adams implies that he hides the behind-the-scenes research from his audience. The hearers are not privy to his "considering the historical-grammatical exegesis of the preaching message," as well as the theological and rhetorical issues. He "considers" the materials but does not present them. But are not these things beneficial for the believers to learn?

My definition of a lecture, and thus also a sermon, permits the inclusion of background research in the delivery, as well as the usual elements such as an exposition of the topic or text. It aims to inform and persuade, and certainly "works for change." Yet, it is still a

---

[8] Jay E. Adams, *Preaching With Purpose*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982; p. 5-6.
[9] Ibid., p. 43.
[10] *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*; Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2001.

lecture in every aspect – content, structure, style, and so on. Granted, most of the theological and exegetical insights fail to become part of the end product. This is only due to sensitivity to the less advanced listeners, and also the impossibility of including all of the relevant information in a relatively brief presentation. Such content is never excluded as a rule, but only due to necessary constraints.

In his book on lecturing, Donald Bligh writes, "In politics lectures are called speeches. In churches they are called sermons. Call them what you like; what they are in fact are more or less continuous expositions by a speaker who wants the audience to learn something."[11] Thus, I am not alone in stating that a sermon is a lecture. But even Bligh imposes restrictions on the lecture that are unjustified.

If saying that a lecture intends for the audience to "learn something" is meant as a restriction, then it must be denied. For "learn" to carry *Merriam-Webster's* first meaning, "to gain knowledge or understanding of or skill in by study, instruction, or experience," is too narrow. But the third meaning is acceptable: "to come to know." The lecture is meant to communicate something, so that the audience may "come to know" the thoughts of the speaker. We will ignore other defects in Bligh's work for now.

[11] Donald A. Bligh, *What's The Use of Lectures?*; San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000; p. 4.

3. ON TEACHING METHOD

A lecture is not limited to presenting facts, but also arguments and exhortations. This is often done even in secular classrooms, so it is strange how some define the lecture otherwise. Many are prejudiced against anything that carries an academic connotation, as the word *lecture* does, and so they define it in a way that renders it vulnerable to their criticisms. They will protest my defining the sermon as a lecture because this would make preaching too academic in nature. But this is my assertion, that the sermon ought to be more academic than it is commonly conceived. It is not enough to provide the audience with only the most superficial findings of our biblical research.

Preachers should apply to their sermons Mortimer Adler's recommendation concerning the lecture:

> Always risk talking over their heads!…It will not hurt if some of the things you say may be beyond their reach. It is much better for them to have the sense that they have succeeded in getting some enlightenment by their effort to reach up (even if they also have the sense that some things to be understood have escaped them) than it is for them to sit there feeling insulted by the patronizing manner in which you have talked down to them.
>
> The truly great books, I have repeatedly said, are the few books that are over everybody's head all of the time. That is why they are endlessly rereadable as instruments from which you can go on learning more and more on each rereading. What you come to understand each time is a step upward in the development of your mind; so also is your realization of what remains to be understood by further effort on your part.
>
> …What is true of books to be read is true of lectures to be listened to. The only lectures that are intellectually profitable for anyone to listen to are those that increase one's knowledge and enlarge one's understanding.[12]

To preach is to give a lecture, and it ought to be somewhat intellectually mature in content. Of course, the speaker is permitted to adjust to the audience's current level of understanding and other limitations (such as attention span), but not to the extent that it becomes entirely comfortable, and thus promotes no growth in them to accommodate more advanced materials in the future.

[12] Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Speak, How to Listen*; New York: Touchstone, 1983; p. 61-62.

While to many it is anathema to suggest that the Bible commands intellectual growth, and in a definite way equates it with sanctification, this is indeed what it teaches: "Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity" (Hebrews 6:1); "Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:13-14); "Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults" (1 Corinthians 14:20); "…and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Colossians 3:10).

There are many more relevant passages available, but we will now proceed to examine and refute several objections and alternate theories, and in the process refine our understanding of the preaching task as has been established so far. We will come across ideas people have regarding preaching and teaching that have resulted from secular theories on education rather than biblical models.

Although professors still find lecturing indispensable in the classroom, contemporary education models tend to favor the role of discussion and active participation. Presumably, this stimulates the students to original thinking, but the honest observer must admit that what passes as a creative thought in the classroom is more often rehashed foolishness.

To quote the great theologian and educator J. Gresham Machen:

> The undergraduate student of the present day is being told that he need not take notes on what he hears in class, that the exercise of the memory is a rather childish and mechanical thing, and that what he is really in college to do is to think for himself and to unify his world. He usually makes a poor business of unifying his world. And the reason is clear. He does not succeed in unifying his world for the simple reason that he has no world to unify. He has not acquired a knowledge of a sufficient number of facts in order even to learn the method of putting facts together. He is being told to practice the business of mental digestion; but the trouble is that he has no food to digest. The modern student, contrary to what is often said, is really being starved for want of facts…
>
> We professors get up behind our professorial desks, it is said, and proceed to lecture. The helpless students are expected not only to listen but to take notes…Such a system – so the charge runs – stifles all originality and all life…A mass of details stored up in the mind does not in itself make a thinker; but on the other hand thinking is absolutely impossible without that mass of details. And it is just this latter impossible operation of thinking without the materials of thought which is being advocated by modern pedagogy and is being put into practice only too well by modern students…In the presence of this tendency, we

> believe that facts and hard work ought again to be allowed to come to their rights: it is impossible to think with an empty mind.[13]

Such a simple point escapes experts in education. Machen first published his book in 1925. Students have been becoming more dim-witted for decades, but the system continues to starve them of information readily available if they would only allow for many more hours of lectures and textbook reading.

To the above, I would only add that even thinking itself may be taught and demonstrated through lectures and textbooks. On the other hand, in a classroom that favors discussion as a pedagogical device, there is nevertheless nothing much to discuss if the students do not know anything about the subject at hand. Rather than learning first from the instructor, and then perchance to refine and even correct his teaching, ignorant students are encouraged to pretend to be experts.

The same problem exists in the church today. Preachers are told to focus on application of biblical truths, but the trouble is that both they and their congregations know too little of the Bible for there to be anything to apply. Machen had also said something about this:

> If the growth of ignorance is lamentable in secular education, it is tenfold worse in the sphere of the Christian religion and in the sphere of the Bible. Bible classes today often avoid a study of the actual contents of the Bible as they would avoid pestilence or disease; to many persons in the Church the notion of getting the simple historical contents of the Bible straight is an entirely new idea.
>
> When one is asked to preach at a church, the pastor sometimes asks the visiting preacher to conduct his Bible class, and sometimes he gives a hint as to how the class is ordinarily conducted. He makes it very practical he says; he gives the class hints as to how to live during the following week. But when I for my part actually conduct such a class, I most emphatically do not give the members hints as to how to live during the following week…a class that gets nothing but practical directions is very poorly prepared for life. And so when I conduct a class I try to give them what they do not get on other occasions; I try to help them get straight in their minds the doctrinal and historical contents of the Christian religion.[14]

My lengthy quotations of Machen are justified by how peculiar the views that I espouse must sound to many believers. But I am not alone in thinking this way, and certainly not the first to identify the problem, as well as the remedy.

---

[13] J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?*; Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991 (original: 1925); p. 16-17, 19-20.
[14] Ibid., p. 20-21.

Christian education must not be a democracy, where everyone is considered as having valuable ideas to contribute; it is not primarily pragmatic, where one is controlled by the "Give me something I can use!" mentality so common in the secularly influenced audience. But we are arguing against symptoms here: the real culprit is anti-intellectualism, from which silly ideas about preaching and education grow, and the solution is biblical intellectualism.

Brookfield and Preskill have produced a volume called, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*.[15] The title reveals that "discussion as a way of teaching," is governed by and presupposes democracy as an ideal, and applies it even to knowledge acquisition. However, Christian knowledge is based on revelation and authority, not democracy. Not everyone is entitled to his opinion. We are to believe what God tells us to believe, and many will suffer eternal damnation for believing the wrong things. Besides the biblical command to obey and hear their spiritual leaders, most Christians are automatically excluded from speaking much at church due to their erroneous beliefs. They must remain silent, and learn. In connection to this, those Bible study sessions that allow for unrestricted expression of everyone's opinions are most destructive.

Without the exchange of ideas in the classroom, even if not at church, how are the students supposed to interact with ideas other than those espoused by the professor? Democratic discussion among incompetent peers is the worst way to answer this question. Why not listen to more than one professor lecturing on the same subject? Or read numerous textbooks by experts in the field?

Robert Hutchins calls the exchange of ideas carried on through the intellectual works produced in western history, "The Great Conversation."[16] Such a conversation is greater than any that may take place in the classrooms of undergraduate college courses. My advice to budding Christian thinkers: talk less,[17] read the Bible and the great theological works, and read the classics.

[15] Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*; San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999.
[16] *The Great Conversation*; Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1994 (original: 1952); p. 46-73.
[17] See Proverbs 10:19, 13:3, 15:2, 17:27, 21:23; Ecclesiastes 5:2; James 1:26, 3:2.

4. LEARNING BY DOING

Another favorite educational model is "learning by doing," or to learn by experience. To learn this way, one must interact with the object about which one seeks knowledge, be it an athletic endeavor, a scientific experiment, a social situation, or life in general. Through the challenges and feedbacks from such experiences, the student is supposed to derive principles suitable for retention, which he may then apply to other similar situations.

This learning method is impossible. One who does not know how to perform a given task at all cannot even begin unless someone through verbal instructions, be it in the form of lectures or textbooks (or other informal equivalents), tells him the elementary principles. When this is done, the person is no longer learning from experience, but through intellectual communication. He is merely applying what he has learned to the experience. And if he can be told the basics, he can perhaps also learn the more advanced materials in a similar manner.

However, some may object, even if one must first learn enough in order to begin, does he afterward not learn from his experience while applying his knowledge? The problem with this is that no one can, without having relevant prior knowledge or presuppositions, choose from the many singular events and factors within his experiences and derive objectively true propositions from them. An infinite number of propositions may be derived from each experience, and which one of these a person "learns" depends on his worldview, already presupposed. The same set of circumstances can instill patience in one, and cynicism in another.

Arthur Holmes points out: "…to suppose unanalyzed experience itself is an omnicompetent teacher presupposes an empiricist theory of knowledge that is nowadays highly suspect. The eighteenth century view that we can gather piecemeal data and come up with generalizations and causal explanations simply has not stood up under scrutiny. Empirical observation is not entirely objective but selective, guided by theoretical assumptions and personal interests. This has become evident in recent work on the history of science: and if experience is not enough for science, how can it be enough for education?"[18]

He is correct, with the qualification that empiricism is "highly suspect" only in certain academic circles, and remains popular among the less informed populace. It generally takes many years for ideas to trickle down from the despised "ivory tower" – which is in fact the command center of the world – to those uninterested in academic struggles, and who falsely imagine themselves to be relatively free from the influence of obscure scholars. It remains that no one ever learns from experience itself, but every observer

[18] Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999 (revised: 1987; original: 1975); p. 89.

brings his entire worldview to the situation, and evaluates it through his presuppositions, which in turn governs the way he processes any information encountered.

When this difficulty is pressed against secular education, it can only result in complete skepticism regarding reality. On the other hand, when the Christian is challenged with such issues, he answers with the verbal revelation given him by the omnipotent creator God. All propositions deducible from divine revelation are rightly considered knowledge. But if so, knowledge comes from revelation and deduction, not experience.

Holmes, under a section called, "Pragmatism In Experiential Education," describes the theory of learning by experience as follows: "Experience is an immersion in natural processes, our sense of security challenged by unforeseen problems which demand solution…All learning is therefore situational…Learning is learning to adjust. Even the classroom simulates life experience, rather than exploring a heritage of truth and values."[19]

To say something else about the ivory tower, most people are oblivious to how learning by experience is a secular philosophy promoted by John Dewey which, as Holmes then says, was "in [his] thinking, simply an application of the theory of natural selection"[20] – that is, an evolutionary doctrine. It is based on anti-Christian philosophical assumptions.

The attitude rampant in today's churches that we should "experience God" rather than to talk about him, besides exhibiting a false sense of piety, is based on a philosophical system hostile to the Christian faith. We increase in the knowledge of God by reading Scripture, listening to preachers that respect biblical authority, engaging in theological reflections, and constantly discussing the things of God with care and reverence.

Another writer has this to say: "A popular liberal slogan has been, 'learning by doing.' So the ten-year-old smokes pot, tries out sex, and sticks a knife into another kid's ribs. He learns by doing. Apparently some educators never suspected that some things should not be done and not be learned. But the pupil is not competent to decide such matters."[21] Conversely, "The Christian educator…is convinced that the popular shibboleth, learning by doing, is unmasked when we see that evil learned in such a manner does irreparable harm."[22]

The current study mainly concerns itself with preaching, and while to discuss the theories of education is not too much of a detour, a thorough philosophy of education must be reserved for another setting. For now, let it suffice to say that learning by doing is an anti-Christian theory, and even sports and carpentry can be taught in a way consistent with the biblical model. We first provide the theoretical basis, and then if there is time, application. Further development occurs through additional theoretical reflections. This

[19] Ibid., p. 88-89.
[20] Ibid., p. 89.
[21] Gordon H. Clark, *A Christian Philosophy of Education*; The Trinity Foundation, 2000 (original: 1946); p. 52.
[22] Ibid., p. 134.

model invariably implies that a properly educated person will possess much more knowledge than his life and vocation require from him.

For the reason that one's knowledge should not be limited by pragmatic concerns, I find Jay Adams' "learning *for* doing,"[23] inadequate as well. It fails to produce a superior student because how certain knowledge may be applicable is not always obvious; this is true even of biblical doctrines. If we were to limit our learning only to knowledge that may be applied, our narrow lives would imply an equally restricted scope for knowledge and skill acquisition.

Adams writes, "Learning takes place when one knows that what he must study is essential to accomplishing what he wants to achieve."[24] That is what the product will be – one who knows only the essentials. How many accounting majors would then be interested in cosmology? Doubtless very few would find the need to read Homer or Milton. Only so much knowledge is required for any given field, and under the learning for doing scheme, one finds no justification to continue his studies after he has reached the necessary level of proficiency, and still less reason to study materials unrelated to his needs.

The correct model that maximizes learning and competence is to perceive knowledge, especially theological knowledge, as inherently valuable, whether one finds occasion to apply it or not. American pragmatists are horrified at the suggestion that knowledge should be acquired for its own sake, but I have no respect for American pragmatism. It produces shallow thinkers and incompetent workers.

However, certain theological knowledge demands obedience and drastic alterations in the ways we think and live; if so, we must comply, and this is application. This allows for an unending pursuit of knowledge, especially as relating to the things of God, as well as ready application where knowledge and actual needs coincide. But it also means that in knowledge acquisition, application never deserves the main focus.

This model of education is heavy on theory, and light on application; it emphasizes thinking more than doing – much more. Although I am wary of empirical endorsements, research in sports psychology suggests that mental rehearsal, with a minimum of actual practice, can be just as effective in improving performance as regular physical training. The point is that, with or without the support of such studies, this learning strategy applies even to areas that seem to be more physical than intellectual. We teach to the mind, and learn by the mind.

In the end, this manner of education produces the most brilliant thinkers who find their daily tasks easy to handle, since their knowledge and capability far exceed the actual requirements. In church, let us be more like Mary than Martha. The latter "was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made" (Luke 10:40), but Jesus says that "Mary has

[23] Jay E. Adams, *Back to the Blackboard: Design for a Biblical Christian School*; Woodruff, South Carolina: Timeless Texts, 1998 (original: 1982); p. 126.
[24] Ibid., p. 127.

chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (v. 42), because she "sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said" (v. 39). Incidentally, this passage in Luke shows that it is more important for women to study theology than to do chores.

Still, many insist that lectures and textbooks are no substitute for life experience, but that is because they have never read a textbook where the author has recorded his life experience for others to read. Who is to prevent us from reading about the experiences of hundreds of people instead of only having our own? Yet, principles derived from life experience, whether others or ours, are unreliable and often plain false. In theology, our life experience will never produce knowledge that approaches the status of divine revelation, so we might as well abandon such a method of learning.

5. THE USE OF STORIES

Let us assume, after the previous pages, that the legitimacy of preaching or lecturing as the proper way to teach has been accepted. There remain a number of false theories and emphases even among those who favor, or at least appear to favor, such an approach to teaching. We will examine two of these; they pertain to the roles of humor and stories in preaching.

Since I intend to spend more time discussing stories, we will quickly dismiss an emphasis on humor in preaching, even if it deserves more extensive argument elsewhere. Humor may be connected to the alleged need to make one's sermons interesting, and so we will not be neglecting this issue too much, since this is something we will come against later on below. For now, note that humor adds no information unattainable through regular speech. It is without scriptural justification, and many may consider its use, especially if it is applied in abundance, to be irreverent.

Sometimes people claim to find certain parts of the Bible humorous, but this says nothing about whether the biblical authors intended to amuse their readers in such a manner. Just because one finds something amusing does not mean it is intended to be a joke. If the listeners find humor in something the minister seriously asserts, fine – unless the context betrays their irreverence. Otherwise, let the preacher take time in his study to read an additional chapter of systematic theology rather than to concoct another humorous anecdote. The use of humor as a device to enhance communication comes from secular theory and human experience, and cannot be justified from Scripture.

True, "A cheerful heart is good medicine" (Proverbs 17:22), but what good is a person who can only be cheerful when bombarded with jokes? The verse does not indicate how one is to become cheerful – I can become quite jolly by reading the ontological argument of Anselm or the genealogy of Christ. What we know is that the Bible is not filled with jokes. To me, the question is not whether we should include humor in our preaching, but whether we should deliberately abstain from it. Without settling this final point, we will proceed to discuss the use of stories in preaching.

The use of stories is usually recommended in preaching for two reasons: to make the message more accessible and to sustain the audience's attention and interest. Since we will be soon dealing with the alleged need to make sermons interesting, here I will only address the first reason, mainly by showing that stories often hinder communication.

At the outset, we must point out that stories can be very difficult to understand. This is illustrated by how American students read their novels in literature classes. Many fanciful interpretations may be given, while the authors may have intended none of them. The teachers say this does not matter, but it indeed matters if an author intends to

communicate definite information to the reader. The foolishness of the American classroom has been carried over to the church, so that believers often tend to derive purely subjective interpretations from the biblical text, and cares little for the intended meaning of a passage.

Alice in Wonderland is so difficult to understand that it requires the extensive notes of *The Annotated Alice*[25] by Martin Gardner to expose the numerous mathematical, philosophical, political, and other types of references spread throughout the story. The dust jacket says that "it was Gardner who first decoded many of the mathematical riddles and wordplay that lay ingeniously embedded" in the stories of Lewis Carroll. Even then, one wonders if some of his annotations are not more speculative than factual.

The modern student has no chance of understanding Carroll without much assistance – given in plain speech instead of narrative form. And how many can perceive the theological references in *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis, and *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien?[26] Even adults do not always grasp the lessons in Aesop's fables and Dr. Suess. And need we mention Shakespeare? Stories require explicit explanations, by the authors or otherwise qualified individuals, or risk producing a myriad of false interpretations.

That the Bible contains stories does not contradict the above, although much of what is in the Bible is properly termed *history*, not stories. The question is the role of narratives in *preaching*. As will be demonstrated from Scripture shortly, preaching ought to explain the stories in the Bible by means of plain and literal speech, instead of adding even more stories by the speaker. In preaching we expound on God's verbal revelation, instead of following its form of presentation. Just because the Bible contains many poems, proverbs, and psalms does not mean that the minister should preach in these literary forms.

Mark 4:33 may appear to some as inconsistent with what has been said so far concerning stories: "With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand." The verse directs us to recognize that there is a sense in which the parables may be understood without extensive explanation, but what this is remains to be seen.

First, we should read both verses 33 and 34: "With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything." Right away we may conclude that the crowds do not understand all that may be inferred from his parables, else he would not need to explain them to his disciples. Jesus speaks to the multitudes in parables, and they would understand them in a certain sense, and then he turns to his disciples and explains them in private, so that the latter group may understand them in a sense or to an extent not applicable to the crowds.

---

[25] *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition*; W. W. Norton & Company, 1999.

[26] Kurt D. Bruner and Jim Ware, *Finding God in the Lord of the Rings*; Tyndale House Publishers, 2001; Mark Eddy Smith, *Tolkien's Ordinary Virtues: Exploring the Spiritual Themes of the Lord of the Rings*; InterVarsity Press, 2002.

Many commentators are all too eager to assert that Jesus desires the crowds to understand what he says, but their exegesis of Mark 4:33 fails to account for verse 34 and the other passages denying that parables are easy to understand. Larry Hurtado relegates Mark 4:12 and 33 to some sort of "prophetic irony."[27] *Matthew Henry* is better: "…he fetched his comparisons from those things that were familiar to them…in condescension to their capacity; though he did not let them into the *mystery* of the parables…"[28]

John Gill observes that Jesus "condescended to their weakness, accommodated himself to their capacities…made use of the plainest similes; and took his comparison from things in nature, the most known and obvious." However, "he spoke the word to them in parables, as they were able to hear, without understanding them; and in such a manner, on purpose that they might not understand."[29] The parables or stories themselves are simple enough, but the theological truths represented may not be at all clear to the hearers.

Matthew 13:1-23 follows the same pattern – Jesus tells the parable of the sower in verses 3-9, and explains its meaning to his disciples in verses 18-23. In verse 10, the disciples ask Jesus, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" Instead of saying that parables are conducive to understanding, Jesus replies, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, *but not to them*…This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.' In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving'" (v. 11, 13-14).

Whatever understanding the crowds may receive, the parables are intended to hide from them "the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven." Such understanding is only given to those whom Christ chooses to grant it. In light of this, Mark 4:33 only means that the multitudes are able to understand the surface of the parables, and at the most only some elementary principles.

They are able to understand the literal stories themselves, but miss all or most of the theological truths they intend to communicate. A more complete understanding is given to the disciples in private through plain explanations. For example, the general audience may understand that the farmer sows seeds into the ground, but only a few receive the interpretation that this means the minister preaches the word of God. Nevertheless, some are able to understand the parables to a greater degree when the insinuations are just too obvious: "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them" (Matthew 21:45).

---

[27] Larry W. Hurtado, *New International Biblical Commentary: Mark*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1983, 1989; p. 73-74.
[28] *Matthew Henry's Commentary, Vol. 5*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2000; p. 384.
[29] John Gill, *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments, Vol. 7*; Paris, Arkansas: The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc., 1989 (original: 1809); p. 404.

Among contemporary works, a superior statement on Mark 4:33 is as follows: "There was *veiling* (or very partial disclosure) before the multitude and *disclosure* (but only partial understanding) to the disciples. This is the pattern illustrated in Ch. 4 and assumed throughout the Gospel of Mark."[30] Another scholar notes, "…the parable is a riddle…veiling their understanding as the Scripture had prophesied…To them Jesus remains a provocative enigma…"[31]

The parables are in general difficult to understand, but the crowds are able to derive some basic ideas from them. On the other hand, the disciples receive direct instructions, but their spiritual inaptitude prevents even them from understanding fully what Jesus says. This interpretation alone explains all the biblical data on the subject, while others fail to account for Jesus' saying that the parables have the explicit purpose of withholding spiritual enlightenment.

Nevertheless, Jesus also uses plain speech in speaking to the crowds when he sees fit. Without quoting the verses, in Luke 4:18-21, Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah, and then plainly states that the prophecy has been fulfilled. In verses 24-27, he cites the historical record concerning Elijah and Elisha, makes a relevant observation regarding their ministries, and says, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown" (v. 24). The speaking is plain, and so the people understand; as a result, they try to kill him (v. 28-29).

To cite an example from the Old Testament, David fails to see himself in Nathan's story until the prophet says, "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:7). Then Nathan provides the explanation in plain speech: "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites" (v. 7-9).

Without already knowing the full context of the incident, it would be impossible to derive such an interpretation only from the story in verses 1-4. To test this, read verses 1-4 to anyone who is altogether ignorant of this part of the Bible, and see if he will come up with verses 7-9 on his own. Again, this shows that stories are difficult to understand without explicit explanations.

John 10:6 says, "Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them." And in John 16:29-30, his disciples say to him, "Now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech. Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God." Jesus answers, "You believe at last!" (v. 31). To facilitate

[30] William L. Lane, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to Mark*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974; p. 173.
[31] *The Reformation Study Bible*; Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, Inc., 1995; p. 1567.

understanding and faith, one should minimize the use of stories, and explain in plain speech any narratives on which he has chosen to preach.

Explaining the sacrificial death of the Messiah to his downcast disciples in his post-resurrection state (Luke 24:17), Jesus proves the proposition, "Christ [had] to suffer these things and then enter his glory" (v. 26), not by the use of stories and illustrations, but by a process of biblical exegesis considered tedious by many: "…beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (v. 27).

Verse 45 says, "Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures." Can anything be plainer than this? Stories and other rhetorical devices do not aid in understanding, but plain speech enables one to state his meaning with clarity and precision. Then only by the grace of God will a person's mind be opened to understand theology.

Therefore, that the Bible contains many narratives does not mean we should adopt such an approach in our preaching; it only means that we should lecture on the meaning of these stories. The apostles lectured and wrote plainly on the meaning and implications of the biblical narratives, as well as expounding on new revelations given to them through special inspiration; they did not use stories as a means to teach divine truths.

Admittedly, Revelation was written by the apostle John, and is filled with figurative elements. How many people understand it? If a minister preaches on Revelation, he should give plain and literal explanations to its passages, rather than using one apocalypse to explain another.

Again, the apostles say to Jesus that plain speech is easier to understand than stories, parables, and figures of speech (John 16:29-30). Therefore, although Jesus has his own reasons for using parables, if a speaker really wants to be understood, he should limit his use of stories. Of course he should expound on the biblical narratives and parables, and even the apocalypses of Daniel and John, but that is using plain speech to explain stories and figures of speech, and not using stories to explain divine truths.

6. A COMPREHENSIVE MINISTRY

All these pages are only to uncover the meanings and implications of the first word in 2 Timothy 4:2. The rest of the verse, among other things, tells us something about the content of our preaching: "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction." We have found out what it means to preach; now we shall consider what it is that we should preach.

"Preach the Word," Paul commands. The *Word*, or *logos*, has such theological and philosophical significance that one can write an entire book on it. Here we are only interested in what it can tell us about the content of the messages we are to preach. It would be easier if we had arrived at this point in our study as a result of having already expounded all of 1 Timothy, and all the previous portions of 2 Timothy. But since we have not done so, I will point to several passages that seem to be directly relevant.

Paul writes at the beginning of 2 Timothy, "So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher" (1:8-11).

These verses contain references to divine election, the incarnation, the atonement, and eternal life (v. 9-10). The resurrection is also implied in that he says Christ "destroyed death" (v. 10). It is this message that Paul proclaims as a "a preacher and an apostle and a teacher" (v. 11, NASB). Obviously, several verses cannot summarize all that Paul preaches, but elsewhere we find that he proclaims to his hearers "the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27).

Then, in verses 13-14, the apostle instructs Timothy to guard the message that he has heard: "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us." By "guard the good deposit," Timothy is not just to retain and live Paul's teaching, but also to spread it, since he says to him, "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2).

If Paul proclaims "the whole will of God," and Timothy is to continue preaching all that he has heard from the apostle, this means that Timothy is to preach "the whole body of

revealed truth"[32] also. Besides, Jesus commands his disciples to teach their hearers "to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20). The content of preaching is therefore all that the Bible says and implies.

Do not underestimate the importance of establishing the scope of our preaching. There are those who, using 2 Timothy 4:2 or other passages,[33] attempt to limit the content of preaching, at least to unbelievers, to what they call "evangelistic" materials. They may point out that 2 Timothy 4:5 says to "do the work of an evangelist." However, as we have seen earlier, based on the context of 4:2 in this letter, the audience consists mostly of believers and false teachers. Timothy has been instructed to instruct and warn the former, and refute the latter. Even if verse 5 intends to be a command to evangelize unbelievers, it does not control the content of preaching that verse 2 intends to express.

Also, the anti-intellectuals who desire to limit the scope of preaching cannot define the minimum required number of doctrinal truths that we must preach in order to perform what they consider to be evangelism. Perhaps they would agree it is necessary to preach on the atonement. But the atonement presupposes the incarnation; the incarnation presupposes the deity of Christ; the deity of Christ presupposes the Trinity. The need for the atonement presupposes the fall of man; the fall of man presupposes the doctrine of man as the image of God; that man is the image of God presupposes creation; creation presupposes God and his attributes, and also supralapsarianism.

Studying the Trinity results in doctrinal formulations concerning the eternal generation of the Son, the definition of personhood (which then carries over to the doctrine of man), and a host of other issues. The incarnation of Christ must be harmonized with the immutability of God, and his sinless birth with the federal headship of Adam, and this latter with the justice and sovereignty of God. To affirm all of these doctrines presupposes the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture. This is just a small demonstration of how all biblical doctrines are interrelated, showing that it is not possible for one who restricts the doctrinal scope of his preaching to be an adequate minister.

"All Scripture," Paul says, "is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The doctrinal ministry must not only be accurate, but also comprehensive. Paul is able to say, "I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men," because "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Acts 20:26-27). One who preaches only "evangelistic" materials to unbelievers and only "practical" truths to believers has not fulfilled his ministry, and is guilty in the sight of God.

Our inability and mortality may prevent us from teaching people absolutely everything there is to know, but we must strive to be comprehensive. Scripture also prescribes the depth of the doctrinal ministry: "We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the

[32] Wuest, p. 154.
[33] One such passage may be 1 Corinthians 2:2, but theirs is a misinterpretation, as can be seen from verse 6, Paul's preaching in Acts, and his letters.

mature…we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began…The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God…We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand…" (1 Corinthians 2:6-7, 10, 12). We should take the apostle James seriously when he says, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers" (James 3:1). Assuming the role, and its honor, also brings with it all the responsibilities implied by the position.

7. NOTES AND DELIVERY

A common question asked by preachers is whether one should write out the message he is to preach, or whether an outline may be sufficient. Given the aforementioned required breadth and depth in preaching, writing out the entire sermon appears to be preferable. But some argue that preaching should be done without any notes – not that we can do without preparation, but only that the materials should be rehearsed enough so that one requires no notes for the actual presentation.[34]

The concern of this latter view is that using notes prevents effective sermon delivery, since the speaker may become rather monotonous and rigid, and fails to properly engage his audience. Needless to say, this viewpoint is especially opposed to writing out the sermon word for word. We will address a related issue further below that renders this and other such concerns unimportant, and thus negates the arguments for favoring preaching without notes. My position is that notes are not a requirement if one knows his materials very well, but it is preferable to use them.

At any rate, few would object to following an outline when preaching a message. A prepared outline enables the speaker to structure his thoughts, thus ensuring a coherent presentation of the materials, and helps prevent the type of free association or stream of consciousness style of preaching passing for inspiration so common in contemporary sermons.

The real debate is whether the entire sermon should be written out and read to the audience during delivery. Karl Barth insists that this must be done; he gives his reasons:

> The basic prerequisite in execution is to write the sermon…a sermon is a speech which we have prepared word for word and written down. This alone accords with its dignity. If it is true in general that we must give an account of every idle word, we must do so especially in our preaching. For preaching is not an art that some can master because they are good speakers and others only by working out the sermon in writing. The sermon is a liturgical event…they can engage in this ministry only after full reflection, to the very best of their knowledge, and with a clear conscience. Each sermon should be ready for print, as it were, before it is delivered…
>
> This demand is an absolute rule for all. We may rob it of its universal validity by applying it only to young preachers until they have had the necessary practice. There is great danger in this type of thinking...[35]

[34] Charles W. Koller, *How to Preach Without Notes*; Baker Book House, 1997.
[35] Karl Barth, *Homiletics*; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991; p. 119-120.

Advocates of preaching without notes usually give only pragmatic reasons, such as how it hinders delivery, and when speaking against writing out every word, the extra effort demanded from the preacher. However, one can almost always find a counterexample to every pragmatic objection. Jonathan Edwards wrote out his sermons and read from his manuscripts during delivery. Eyewitness accounts indicate that at times he would hardly look up from his notes, and yet he was one of the greatest revivalists. This is the way he delivered his famous *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, and his hearers were more than a little affected, some cried out so loudly that at one point he had to pause and ask them to quiet down, so that he may finish reading from his manuscript.[36]

Another example may be the radio addresses delivered by Winston Churchill. To quote Mortimer Adler:

> Hearing him on radio during the opening days of the Second World War, I listened with awe at what appeared to be a beautifully organized speech, eloquently delivered with all the hesitations and pauses that indicated improvisation on his part. There were many moments when he appeared to be reaching for the right word to come next. But the truth of the matter was, as I later learned, that the speech was completely written out and delivered so cunningly that it had all the qualities of impromptu utterance.[37]

Of course, this has to do with radio broadcasts, and not a speech presented in person. But it still goes to show that the objections based on delivery, although I will argue that they are unimportant, can be overcome.

Pragmatic arguments are almost worthless. One must give the sort of theological reasons that Barth offers above. To emphasize delivery is pragmatic, and thus fails to convince, but theological concerns compel us to prefer depth and precision in our sermons.[38] Writing out the sermons in their entirety helps achieve these qualities.

Having made this a theological issue instead of a pragmatic one, some may argue that the apostles never had to write out their sermons; rather, they were inspired by the Holy Spirit. This argument is irrelevant since no one possesses inspiration of the same kind today. The Holy Spirit may "inspire" us in the sense of making our minds efficient and capable, but the type of inspiration the apostles and prophets had was unique to them. Certainly no one may add to Scripture, the New Testament canon having been completed.

Many people do not understand 1 Corinthians 2:13, and try in vain to apply it directly to themselves: "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in

[36] Such an account of his preaching has been challenged. Whether we use Edwards as an example, the real point here is that there are effective ministers who employ full manuscripts in their preaching.
[37] Adler, p. 69.
[38] But see Wilbur Ellsworth, *The Power of Speaking God's Word* (Christian Focus Publications, 2000).

words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words."[39] This refers to the inspiration given to the apostolic company so that, when an apostle speaks as an apostle, he speaks the very words of God. He does not use words he has formed to describe a thought God puts in his mind, but the very words themselves are given him by the Holy Spirit. One claiming inspiration of this kind today is a heretic, in which case the problem becomes a different one than that which we are discussing; otherwise, we "must prepare sermons with prayer and toil."[40]

However, it is misleading to say that the apostles and the early Christians never wrote out their sermons. Some believe that 1 Peter may have been a baptismal sermon written by the apostle whose name it bears,[41] and Ronald Nash argues that "the Epistle to the Hebrews is actually a type of written sermon,"[42] authored by Apollos. Even if neither of these are true, Paul says that his letters are to be read to the churches: "After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea" (Colossians 4:16); "I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers" (1 Thessalonians 5:27). And if the apostles never wrote out their sermons, the early church fathers wrote enough of them to fill volumes.

There are good reasons, therefore, to write out our sermons in their entirety, and read from the manuscripts during delivery.[43] But whether this practice becomes a moral duty to the preacher, as Barth maintains, we will not further investigate.

---

[39] Without settling the dispute surrounding this verse, it remains that the apostles were uniquely inspired. See John 14:26, 16:13; 1 Corinthians 14:37; 1 Thessalonians 4:2, 8; 2 Peter 3:2; 1 John 4:6.
[40] Barth, p. 120.
[41] But see Wayne Grudem, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 1 Peter*; Grand Rapids, Michigan; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000 (original: 1988); p. 40-41.
[42] Ronald H. Nash, *The Meaning of History*; Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1998; p. 47.
[43] It is important to note my intention here. I am merely suggesting that there are good reasons for this approach, so that it should not be ruled out. But I am not saying that it is the only proper approach, or even the best one. It has not been my own practice to use full manuscripts.

8. CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

This affords me a natural transition to discuss the place of written publications in the doctrinal ministry. Recall what Barth asserts: "Each sermon should be ready for print, as it were, before it is delivered."[44] Also note that, "At the meetings of learned societies or academic associations…The speaker knows in advance that he is expected to submit his speech, as delivered, for subsequent publication in the proceedings of the conference."[45]

Since sermons and lectures that are fully written out are already ready for publication, we ought to consider the place of reading in the doctrinal ministry and the believer's spiritual development. It is true that a written sermon may be different in several aspects than what is intended as an article not meant for oral delivery, but for our purposes the differences are negligible.

The two should not be all that different in the first place – I find no trouble in delivering the present article as a sermon (or divide it into a series of sermons), or to preach by reading a chapter from one of my books. Remember, I have established that a sermon is a lecture; what I write as a sermon does not have to be all that different from an article or part of a book. Therefore, in this section we will not only be referring to written sermons, but all Christian literature in general.

It can be a dangerous thing to be somewhat proficient at word studies without knowing enough about biblical revelation as a system. The meaning of a word is finally determined by its usage and theological background, not merely its dictionary definition. Failing to observe this principle, William Barclay writes, "The very fact that the word *logos* is used for the Christian message is very significant. It means *a spoken message*, and therefore it means that the Christian message is not something which is learned from books, but something which is transmitted from person to person."[46]

If this is true, his entire 17-volume commentary on the New Testament does not contain the Christian message, nor can his several other books enlighten us as to the nature of Christianity. Even more perplexing is the question of what we have been reading from the Bible all this time. From what he says, it certainly cannot be the Christian message.

However, in the same paragraph, he says, "The Christian message comes far more often through the living personality than through the printed or the written page."[47] However, if "the Christian message *is not* something which is learned from books," then it must mean

---

[44] Barth, p. 119.
[45] Adler, p. 73.
[46] William Barclay, *New Testament Words*; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1964, 1974; p. 179.
[47] Ibid., p. 179.

that it *always* comes from the spoken word. For him to then say that it only "far more often" comes this way means that it *sometimes* comes from the written page, and thus contradicts his earlier statement. But "sometimes" is still not good enough – all that we know about the Christian message comes from the writings of the apostles and prophets.

Sinclair Ferguson brings our attention to Luther's example:

> Early in his ministry, Martin Luther, the reformer, had little time for Christian literature. Like others since, he tended to regard Christian literature as antagonistic to the spirit of the gospel. The gospel, he said, is about the preached word and we must preach. Yet that same Martin Luther (incredible though it seems) was responsible for one-third of all the books published in the German language in the first half of the sixteenth century! On every bookshelf in Germany, one out of every three books was probably authored by Luther!
>
> Why was this? Luther saw that by writing he could spread the message of the gospel and the joy of the Reformation; by reading Christian people would grow in grace and the church of Jesus Christ would be built up and strengthened.
>
> Think about the biographies you have read. Isn't it true that the majority of greatly-used Christians were men and women who were always using, in one sense or another, printed material? Thus, in the purpose of God, using Christian literature has been a sign of vitality in the people of God…There are many reasons for his. One is that the Christian faith is a faith of the mind…[48]

I am glad Ferguson mentions the nature of faith. Romans 10:17 says, "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." From this verse, I have heard the argument made that faith comes by hearing, not reading, and therefore only preaching stimulates faith in others. The less extreme thinks that hearing is at least better in producing faith than reading. But the verse neither denies that faith can come from reading, nor does it say that hearing is better.

To cast doubt upon the effectiveness of reading based on this verse contradicts biblical teaching. The apostle John says, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31).

Note: "…these are *written* that you may *believe*…" Faith comes by reading as well as hearing. This passage in itself is conclusive evidence against the idea that "the Christian message is not something which is learned from books." Other than the Bible, no written

[48] Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Read Any Good Books*?; Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992; p. 2-3.

literature carries divine authority, but this is also true concerning preaching. To the extent that our written message is faithful to Scripture, it is an effective means through which God may generate faith in the minds of readers. Regeneration comes only from God's direct action within the person, but the Christian message itself *can* be learned from books.

Ferguson realizes that "the Christian faith is a faith of the mind." The crucial issue, therefore, is not whether the message is spoken or written, although the written word is superior when it comes to precision and permanence. What matters is whether the proper intellectual information has been successfully conveyed. This being so, the Christian message brings faith even when communicated through sign language, as can be done when ministering to the deaf.

If I were to point out that the longevity of ideas written down tend to be greater than those merely spoken, some would invariably object that Jesus had never written a book. This point has been repeated over and over again, usually in the context of trying to show how influential Christ has been in spite of what he did not do. But it is puzzling as to how such an argument can be made by people who have read the four gospels and the letters of Paul, where the life, words, and ideas of Christ have been recorded in written form. It is immaterial whether Christ himself wrote anything – the question is what the status of Christianity would be today if the New Testament had never been written.

Objections against writing and reading Christian literature again appear to be the result of a prejudice against items and activities that carry academic connotations. Christianity, according to them, is supposed to be lively, dynamic, creative, and personal. And to them books are none of these things. That we must so emphasize preaching, a form of verbal communication and thus an intellectual activity, already pains them enough. Once we dismiss such anti-intellectualistic nonsense, the opposition against written materials is left without justification.

9. REFUTE! REBUKE! REMIND!

We will consider the rest of 2 Timothy 4:2: "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction." Besides commanding Timothy to preach the word of God, Paul also directs him as to when he should preach, and in what forms his preaching may take. The apostle lays down the principle that preaching is universal in several ways: it should propagate the whole scope of biblical revelation, it is always appropriate as a form of ministerial expression, and it functions to address all types of needs – to "correct, rebuke and encourage."

That all of Scripture should be proclaimed through preaching has already been established, but Paul proceeds to say that this ministry is to be performed at all times: "be prepared in season and out of season." The words translated "be prepared" mean to "be ready," "be persistent," or "stand by it." Lenski prefers "stand at hand," by which he intends to mean "Be right on the spot!"[49] Timothy is to be right there preaching, whatever the condition may be.

As for "in season and out of season," it is better rendered in the NRSV as "whether the time is favorable or unfavorable." It may seem reasonable to assume that different types of ministries are suited for different occasions. There is a time for prayer, a time for music, a time for fellowship, a time for counseling, and a time for preaching. However, Paul says that preaching is appropriate at all times. It makes no difference whether the setting is a funeral or a wedding, whether we are at church or the dinner table, whether the audience is friendly or hostile, or whether it consists of adults or children – preaching should be done on all occasions, having priority over every other ministry. Just when one thinks that a certain situation is "unfavorable" toward preaching, that is the time to preach. And when the time becomes "favorable," Paul says, preach again.

Preaching may take several forms. As mentioned earlier, although a lecture can inform, it may also "correct, rebuke and encourage." For "correct," Lattimore's "confute,"[50] is acceptable given Thayer's "to call to account, show one his fault…"[51] We should "overwhelm in argument" and "refute conclusively"[52] the false teachers. The word is used of "the exposure and confutation of false teachers of Christianity"[53] in Titus 1:9: "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can

---

[49] R. C. H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon*; Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2001 (original: 1937); p. 852.
[50] Richmond Lattimore, *The New Testament*; New York: North Point Press, 1996; p. 462.
[51] Thayer, p. 203.
[52] *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*; "confute."
[53] Thayer, p. 203.

encourage others by sound doctrine and *refute* those who oppose it." Mounce has "confront."[54] If as Wuest says, the word "speaks of a rebuke which results in the person's confession of his guilt, or if not his confession, his conviction of sin,"[55] then Lenski's "convict"[56] successfully conveys the meaning. The minister is to *confute* (or to refute by argument) the heretic, and possibly bringing him to a *conviction* about his errors.

"Rebuke" in the NIV is accurate, but one needs to realize the word refers to a very sharp reprimand, not a gentle warning. It is used in connection with exorcism in the ministry of Jesus: "When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he *rebuked* the evil spirit. 'You deaf and mute spirit,' he said, 'I command you, come out of him and never enter him again'" (Mark 9:25).

A false conception of biblical love has caused many to consider severe rebuke as unchristian behavior, but Scripture indicates otherwise: "Better is open rebuke than hidden love" (Proverbs 27:5); "Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning" (1 Timothy 5:20); "This testimony is true. Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith" (Titus 1:13); "These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you" (Titus 2:15).

Biblical love requires one to rebuke another sharply under certain circumstances. Here in particular, Paul says for Timothy to rebuke others for holding to false doctrines. That is, to reprove them sharply, with a threat of "impending penalty."[57] Thayer defines the word as, "to tax with fault…chide, rebuke, reprove, censure severely"[58] Both "rebuke" and "reprove" are good translations, as long as English readers understand the strength of the word, and the severity of the intended reprimand.

Gordon Fee prefers "urge"[59] rather than "encourage." The word may be more gentle than the previous two, but Lenski thinks that, perhaps given the context, "the meaning can scarcely be…comfort," and prefers "admonish" instead.[60] "Exhort" receives multiple endorsements. A fondness for alliteration may justify the translation, "Refute! Rebuke! Remind!" – although *remind* may not be precise enough unless understood as "admonish"; otherwise, "confute, reprove, exhort"[61] is more than acceptable.

There are five aorist imperatives in the verse, and so Mounce translates it as follows: "Preach the word! Be prepared when it is opportune or inopportune! Confront! Rebuke! Exhort! – with complete patience and teaching."[62] The second seems to qualify the first,

---

[54] William D. Mounce, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 46: Pastoral Epistles*; Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, Inc., 2000; p. 574.
[55] Wuest, p. 155.
[56] Lenski, p. 853.
[57] Wuest, p. 155.
[58] Thayer, p. 245.
[59] Fee, p. 285.
[60] Lenski, p. 853.
[61] Lattimore, p. 462.
[62] Mounce, p. 553.

as assumed when the words are discussed above. The minister is to preach; the content of his preaching is the whole word of God. In his preaching, he is to refute those who believe false doctrines, rebuke them so that they may be sound in the faith, and exhort or urge them to believe and obey the true faith. This can be a very taxing task, and therefore requires "great patience" (2 Timothy 4:2)

The basis from which one executes all of the above is "doctrine" (v. 2, KJV). We refute with arguments the heretic so that he may see the error of his false *doctrine*; we rebuke him so that he may be warned of the consequences for adhering to the said *doctrine*; we then exhort him to believe and live in accordance to true *doctrine*. "Doctrine is the foundation and the fountain of all religious life, false doctrine of a false religious life, true doctrine of genuine religious and truly Christian life. All Scripture, which is full of religious facts, *is* doctrine…To be without this doctrine is to be left in darkness…to be tossed to and fro by every wind of false teaching like a helpless vessel that is at the mercy of the waves…a pitiful condition."[63] Mounce thinks that the emphasis here is on the act of teaching rather than what is taught; however, he admits that "it is the gospel, the word, that is taught."[64] An excellent minister possesses tremendous doctrinal insights, he is able to lead God's people with "knowledge and understanding" (Jeremiah 3:15), and teaches truth to them with great patience and endurance.

[63] Lenski, p. 853-854.
[64] Mounce, p. 574.

10. GOD GIVES THE INCREASE

We have summarized the preaching ministry as taught in verse 2, and now we come to an objection that may have arisen in the reader's mind long ago: How can such an intellectualistic, authoritarian, impractical, humorless, and unimaginative approach gain the audience's interest? Will not the presentation be rather boring, if not repulsive? And with the lecture-like sermon already written in a manuscript to be read by the minister, will not the monotony become unbearable?

The question is put in the pejorative terms that probably reflect the objector's attitude, but we have dealt with issues relating to the intellect, authority, pragmatism, humor, and narratives in preaching, as well as the advantages of writing out the sermon. The objection now being considered is again a pragmatic one, namely, some find it hard to accept that such an approach to preaching will attract anyone, or produce much positive effect. We may repeat our earlier assertion that pragmatic concerns can form no real objections at all, but there are more detailed answers.

To begin, we may cite the final verse of our text for this study: "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Timothy 4:3). Timothy is commanded to preach in the manner described in verse 2 precisely because "the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine." He is to refute, rebuke, and exhort them, rather than to accommodate them. The biblical solution is confrontation, not accommodation.

Additionally, Paul writes that these people who "will not put up with sound doctrine" would instead "gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear." For one's preaching to be naturally of interest to such individuals, one must become one of these teachers who would "say what their itching ears want to hear." Preacher who has attracting listeners as their priority must then change their doctrine, not just their presentation.

Charles Swindoll speaks for many when he says, "Theology needs to be interesting,"[65] but he is wrong. Instead, *true Christians are interested* in theology – the knowledge of God is inherently desirable to the regenerate, and separates them from those who are not. Preachers are obligated to present the whole scope of biblical revelation with clarity and accuracy, but to be attentive is the responsibility of the hearer. One who is not already interested in theology should examine himself, to see if he is indeed in the faith. Verse 3 says that many will not hear; the crisis is not that many preachers will be boring.

[65] Charles R. Swindoll, *Growing Deep in the Christian Life*; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986, 1995; p. 10.

Assuming that the preacher's doctrine is pure, the Bible blames the hearers for not producing spiritual fruit, but with the sovereignty of God as the determining factor. Jesus explains the parable of the sower as follows:

> When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. (Matthew 13:19-23)

"He who has ears, let him hear" (v. 8), Jesus says. When God sends the prophet Ezekiel to speak to Israel, he commands, "Son of man, go now to the house of Israel and speak my words to them" (Ezekiel 3:4; also 12:2). However, he also says, "But the house of Israel is not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for the whole house of Israel is hardened and obstinate" (v. 7). Israel is unwilling to listen to Ezekiel because their minds are "hardened and obstinate" against God, not that Ezekiel is an ineffective speaker.

Thus, God tells the prophet, "You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious. But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you" (2:7-8). 2 Timothy 4:2 prescribes for us the preaching ministry after the tradition of the apostles, and refusing to speak in such a manner when we have been commissioned to do so is rebellion against God.

Not only is a rejection of the message blamed on the hearers, but a positive reception of the message is correspondingly credited to the audience: "And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe" (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

For the explanation to be complete, we will mention that all this is true on the human level, but ultimately it is God who works in a person to will and to act: "…for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13). Other relevant passages include 1 Corinthians 3:6-7 and Romans 9:18: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow"; "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden."

Against the objection that the type of preaching proposed in these pages is impossible for most hearers to comprehend, the Scripture again places the duty of grasping the message on the hearers, and emphasizes that God is the one who gives understanding: "Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this" (2 Timothy 2:7). Rather than accommodating the hearers in ways unwarranted by biblical precepts, the preacher should urge the congregation to be more studious. However, it is God alone who gives understanding. In preaching I inform, argue, rebuke, and exhort with sound doctrine, but depend on the sovereign grace of God, who uses the words by means of which to convert and edify the hearers. Therefore, the "free will" of the humanists is denied.

Pragmatism is impractical, humor is distracting, and narrative is ambiguous – give me a theological lecture instead. Preach the word to me; refute the false doctrines that wish to seduce me; rebuke me in areas where I may have strayed; exhort me to renew my commitment to believe and obey the Scripture. Going through all sorts of rhetorical gymnastics to hide the sermon's lack of substance only generates disdain in my mind for the preacher. If he is out of ideas, I would welcome hearing a chapter from a seminary textbook or biblical commentary in place of what he thinks to be a proper sermon.

It all depends on the condition of the hearers and the work of God within them. Many people consider the Bible uninteresting, but true Christians dare not try to modify its message or presentation because of this, nor do they sense the need to do so. They realize that the fault is in the readers, not the Bible. Likewise, it is the hearer's responsibility to appreciate the type of preaching advocated here. The minister is not required to make the sermon appealing to the people. In answer to the objection that he may nevertheless try to do so for the sake of capturing their attention, the proper way for making a sermon more interesting is to enhance the doctrinal content, not to add jokes and stories.

Much remains to be said, but we have outlined many of the main ideas. Instead of adjusting their presentation to contemporary culture, ministers are authorized to command Christians to be interested in hearing doctrinal sermons. He who hates understanding may hate it still, but the most urgent need in the church today is a greater intellectual comprehension and appreciation of theology, which in turn provides the only foundation from which we may proceed to resolve other important issues. The way to effect such an improvement is through theological lectures, a form of teaching that even the regular sermon ought to assume.