

The Danger of Practical Preaching

Why people need more than the bottom line.

Rob, a stockbroker, thought sermons should be 20 minutes. No longer. To him, a good sermon was what others call the conclusion. "Cut to the bottom line," he said. "That's what I expect at work, and that's what I want at church."

Stan, a preacher, didn't see length as the issue, but he was determined every sermon be "practical." He preached on five principles of friendships, six secrets of managing money, and four ways to win over worry. He believed in sound doctrine, but he felt he had to give people something they could take to work on Monday morning.

These men illustrate two fallacies about biblical preaching: The Bottom Line Fallacy and the Practical Fallacy. Both reveal a misunderstanding, not merely of preaching, but of the workings of Scripture.

Picture a wilderness. A pioneer carves out a path, chopping away brush, felling trees, marking the way to a new outpost. As years pass, that path is traveled a thousand times till it becomes a wide, paved road. From it, other trails branch off, leading to other new outposts. Trails intersect, becoming crossroads. More outposts become towns. More trails become roads. More links are made till what was once wilderness is civilized.

Preaching is the work of spiritually civilizing the minds of Christian disciples. Preaching—especially expository preaching—cuts *truth trails* in the minds of our listeners. Our task is not only to display God's "point," but to instill God's *logic*—how he gets to that point.

For example, we do not simply preach the conclusion of 1 Corinthians 13—that "the greatest of these is love"—but we move people through the dimensions and definitions of love in that great chapter. We show that Paul intended such love be not only at weddings but also at church meetings as well. In other words, we not only establish the outpost—"the greatest of these is love"—but the truth trail as well.

But here is where we confront the fallacies.

Bottom Line Fallacy

When our goal is to "bottom line" our preaching, we look in our text for the "so" and preach that conclusion. For example, our sermon drives home the truth that we need not be afraid. If we have been effective, our brothers and sisters go home with this outpost of truth established or enlarged in their thinking. But here's the rub. On Tuesday, when some frightening crisis looms in their lives, they may remember, "the Bible says we are not to be afraid," but they don't know *how* to be strong. They don't know the *trail*, the process the mind and heart follow to fearlessness. We exposed them to the conclusion without the thinking that makes that conclusion work.

Perhaps you have read an abstract of an article—a short summary of a longer work. After you read it, you know what the article is about. You know what the point is. But you haven't been exposed to the careful reasoning, to the illustrations, to the step-by-step logic and careful writing of the author. The abstract may *interest* you, but without the author's careful development, it is not likely to *convince* you. Nor is it likely to be important or memorable in your thinking. And you can be sure the author will not think you know what he wrote.

Sermons that are abstracts of Scripture may properly summarize a biblical truth, but they are unconvincing. They do not reorient our thinking. We may know the bottom line, but we don't know how to live what we know. Without a truth trail, people cannot find their own way to the outposts of truth in their own hearts. Sometimes laying down that truth trail, showing the step-by-step thinking of a text, simply cannot be done in 20 minutes.

Practical Fallacy

I only vaguely recall the world of geometry—axioms, theorems, conclusions. I do remember the inevitable question: "Why do we need to know this stuff?" And I remember Mr. Cermak's answer: "Whether or not you use these formulae, geometry teaches you to think logically."

Some preachers are afraid of the question, "Why do we need to know this stuff?" so they try to make every sermon "practical," meaning it is about everyday issues like money or kids. Doctrinal preaching, or the week-by-week exposition of a biblical book appears not to scratch where people itch. People want sermons about things they can use on Monday. Like the sophomores in my geometry class.

But Paul tells us, "All Scripture...is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." *All* Scripture. All Scripture is practical. It is practical, not because it all addresses everyday concerns, but because it all "civilizes" our thinking.

As I preached my way through Colossians, for example, we gradually tromped out a wide path to the truth that simply trusting Christ equips us with greater wisdom and righteousness than any counterfeit wisdom can offer. Put that way, it seems like an esoteric, impractical truth, far removed from the water cooler and van pool. But it was Paul's purpose, and therefore mine, to show just how practical this is for the believer. How freeing, simple, and safe. When we eventually arrived at the "practical" passages later in the epistle—"clothe yourself with compassion," for example—we could see not only the command but we had come to better understand the spiritual thinking that makes Christian compassion possible.

The Bible spends much more time on shaping the spiritual mind than commanding particular behavior. We need far more training in the ways of grace, of spiritual perceptions, and of what God is really like, than we do in how to communicate with our spouse. Understanding the glory of Christ is far more practical than our listeners imagine. Properly preached, every sermon based on a passage of Scripture is fundamentally practical. Every author of Scripture wrote to effect change in God's people. It is our job as preachers to find the persuasive logic of that author and put that clearly and persuasively before our people

through biblical exposition.

The Ready Mind

It may seem to us sometimes that the Christians to whom we preach are not interested in the truth trails of Scripture; or worse, that they won't get it. We hear so much about the postmodern mind that we assume our postmodern people will reject the absolute logic of the Bible. It is true that our listeners are susceptible to relativism. It is true that we must not only make clear what is true from the Word, but also demonstrate that other ideas they may hold are *not* true. But we may forget that converted people have transformed minds. Preaching biblical truth to unbelievers (in a seeker service, for instance) is an entirely different matter than preaching to believers. The truth isn't different. The capacity of the listener is.

God promised Jeremiah that in the New Covenant he would "put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts." New believers, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, almost immediately begin to understand spiritual realities that eluded them before. It is like a gifted child. Sometimes, even before a child starts school, we realize "that kid has a mind for numbers," or music, or science. We say that because when they are introduced to something new in that sphere they understand it much more quickly than other children. It is like they are already wired for that kind of information. Christians are, from the moment of their new birth, wired for spiritual, biblical information. We "have a mind for it."

Thus, when a preacher stands and opens before them the logic of the Scriptures—the contemplations of a psalmist or the doctrinal logic of an epistle—they understand it, like a gifted child. And the logic of that text gradually becomes the logic of their own minds.

Truth trail preaching, the careful and persuasive exposition of Scriptural thinking, shapes ready Christian minds for the everyday decisions unscripted in Scripture. When we face an ethical dilemma at work or a discipline problem at home, our minds walk the truth trails we have learned and we are able to reason our way, by the help of the Holy Spirit, to a biblical conclusion, even when no verse of Scripture directly addresses our situation.

When we preach only the principle, the bullet points, the bottom line, or when we try to make every sermon about an everyday problem, we may set truth in the minds of our hearers, but we do not set the logic and pulse of God into their minds and hearts. On the other hand, biblical exposition that lays out the Lord's own logic and heartbeat shapes "doers of the Word and not hearers only."

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