

GOSPEL CENTRED

PREACHING

Becoming the preacher God wants you to be



Tim Chester and Marcus Honeysett

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by Tim Chester
and Marcus Honeysett

Gospel-centred preaching

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INTRODUCTION

To preach is a tremendous privilege. It is a beautiful thing to do. Words have power. Even human words can heal and hurt, create and destroy. How much more the words of God.

God created the world by a word. He rules human history through his word. In the Old Testament, whenever the king and the prophet went head to head there was only ever one winner. And now Christ extends his reign through the gospel word. His kingdom grows as we proclaim his word, calling people to the obedience of faith. God's word brings life and freedom. Preaching is to proclaim this life-giving, liberating message of the kingdom of God. Gospel-centred preaching is preaching the gospel to win people's affections for Christ, creating lives that glorify God.

And preaching is fundamentally *the proclamation of good news*. That's what the New Testament words for "preaching" mean: to proclaim, herald or announce. We are messengers from God sent to announce the good news that his King is coming to restore his reign over the earth.

That message, though, is *not* good news to those who are rebels—including you and me. But the good news is that in his grace God offers forgiveness and righteousness through the death and resurrection of his Son. So "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10 v 13).

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can

anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” **Romans 10 v 14-15**

In one sense *every* Christian is a bearer of the good news. We preach the gospel to ourselves when we resist temptation by reminding ourselves that God is bigger and better than anything sin offers. We preach the gospel to other Christians when we comfort or challenge them with the truth. We preach the gospel to unbelievers when we urge them to follow Christ.

God, however, has also gifted people in the church to preach in more formal contexts—Sunday sermons, interactive Bible studies, children’s talks and so on. Our focus in this book is on these more formal times of preaching, especially sermons. We want the word of God to be proclaimed everywhere and all through the week, not just at a formal gathering on Sunday. But public preaching shapes the culture of a church and sets the agenda for life-on-life discipleship.

How to use this book

This workbook is designed so you can read it on your own or as part of a group, with questions for personal reflection or group discussion.

It can also form the curriculum for preaching training for a small or larger group. You could cover a chapter at each meeting of the group, along with other exercises. Or it could be studied more intensively with one part per session (perhaps with people choosing between chapters 13-15 and 16-17, depending on the ministry in which they’re involved).

Alternatively, you could work through this book one to one with a partner as you encourage each other to grow as preachers.

Here are some regular training exercises you could do alongside the material in this book:

1. **Preaching preparation:** Working on a passage together from scratch to model how to handle the Bible and shape your work into a sermon.

2. **Preaching workshop:** Asking participants to preach a short message before receiving peer feedback.
3. **Preaching debrief:** Discussing sermons with a more experienced preacher to explore together how you arrived at your understanding of the passage, and then shaped it into a sermon.

A word of warning

God says:

These are the ones I look on with favour: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who trembles at my word.” **Isaiah 66 v 2**

We need to listen to sermons with discernment, subjecting them to the ultimate authority of God’s word. But the greater danger for most of us is that of learning to listen to sermons with a critical spirit. We evaluate the preacher rather than allowing ourselves to be evaluated by God’s word. This workbook will encourage us to think about what sermons should accomplish and how they do that. But the more you think about the mechanics of a sermon, the greater the danger of this kind of punditry. We need to be people who tremble at God’s word however it is being preached.

A word of acknowledgement

Many people have influenced our preaching, some by talking about it and many more by modelling it. More than any other source, Tim learned to preach by listening to his father, Richard Chester. Not only did he provide a fine model of preaching, he also laid the theological foundations of Tim’s life. Richard allowed us to plunder his notes on training preachers for this book.

Marcus looks back with gratitude to church and mission leaders who, when he was in his late teens and early 20s, encouraged him to have a go and were incredibly gracious with his stumbling first steps. There is nothing better for junior preachers than having encouraging, wise role models.

The Principles

The Goals of Preaching

- 1. Capturing the affections for Christ:** The goal of preaching is *to capture the affections of our hearts for Christ*.
- 2. So that lives are changed:** The goal of preaching is to capture the affections of our hearts for Christ *so that lives are changed*.
- 3. So that God is glorified:** The goal of preaching is to capture the affections of our hearts for Christ so that lives are changed *so that God is glorified*.

The Means of Preaching

- 4. The word:** Effective preachers trust in the authority of the Bible.
- 5. The Spirit:** Effective preachers trust in the power of the Spirit.
- 6. The preacher:** Effective preachers trust in the character of God.

The Content of Preaching

- 7. Preaching good news:** Because the gospel is good news, your sermon should be good news.
- 8. Preaching Christ:** Because the whole Bible points to Christ, your sermon should point to Christ.

- 9. Preaching to unbelievers:** Because our problem is the heart, your sermon should address the heart.

The Priorities of Preaching

- 10. Make it clear:** Your sermon should make the passage clear.
- 11. Make it real:** Your sermon should make the passage real.
- 12. Make it felt:** Your sermon should make the passage felt.

The Process of Preaching

- 13. Structuring a sermon:** Ensure everything contributes to your main aim.
- 14. Writing a sermon:** Let the word do the work.
- 15. Delivering a sermon:** Passionate preaching requires a passionate preacher.
- 16. Preparing a Bible study:** Help people discover the message of the text by asking good questions.
- 17. Leading a Bible study:** Keep people focused on the message of the text and its implications.

Finding your way around



Consider this

A scenario—often based on a real-life situation—which raises some kind of dilemma or frustration in gospel ministry.



Bible background

A relevant Bible passage together with some questions to help you think it through.



Read all about it

A discussion of the principle, both in terms of its theological underpinning and its contemporary application.



Questions for reflection

Questions that can be used for group discussion or personal reflection.



Ideas for action

Some ideas or an exercise to help people think through the application of the principle to their own situation.

We have tried to make this book work:

- whether it is read by an individual or used as the basis for group discussion.
- whether you want to work through it systematically or turn to particular topics as they arise in church life.

PART ONE

THE GOALS OF PREACHING



1

CAPTURING THE AFFECTIONS FOR CHRIST

Principle

The goal of preaching is to *capture the affections of our hearts for Christ.*



Consider this

I, Marcus, was speaking at a meeting of Christian students. The young man leading the meeting invited me to come to the front while he prayed for me. “We’re delighted to have a guest speaker tonight who’s going to come to teach us the Bible.” “Hmm,” I thought. “True, but not true.”

He prayed and I was left in front of the microphone. “Actually I’m not just going to teach the Bible,” I began. “I’m going to preach the gospel.” As I looked out at the group I could see a number of them thinking: “What’s the difference?”



Bible background

Read 2 Corinthians 4 v 1-6

- ? What should preachers not do?
- ? What exactly *is* preaching according to these verses?
- ? What is the goal of preaching?



Read all about it

Gospel preaching must involve teaching the Bible. Our authority comes from God's word and that word must be understood. That's the purpose of explanation. Anything less than this and our preaching will lack substance and rely on human power.

But preaching is so much more than simply teaching the Bible. Vaughan Roberts, President of The Proclamation Trust in the UK, says: "I always feel a little uncomfortable when I'm about to speak and someone says, 'Vaughan's just about to teach the Bible to us'." He explains: "That's *part* of what I'm doing, but I shouldn't just be teaching the Scriptures so people understand them. I should be longing and praying and preaching, as far as I'm able, that people will be so captivated and amazed by this truth that their hearts will be filled with love for God and amazement at his glory."¹

Preaching is:

- **Proclaiming** God's word in such a way that people see God's greatness and rejoice in his total supremacy.
- **Presenting** the *light* of God so that, through the Holy Spirit, people might get taken up with the *person* of God.
- **Speaking** the words of God to extend the reign of God in people's hearts, so that they yearn with David: "as the deer pants for streams of water so my soul pants for you" (Psalm 42 v 1).
- **Proclaiming** good news of peace with God so that rebels submit to him and enjoy him for ever.
- **Presenting** the surpassing treasure of God so that people love him more than life.
- **Leading** people in the ways of God so that—taught, corrected, reproved and trained in righteousness—we might be equipped for every good work.

¹ Vaughan Roberts, "An Exposition of 1 Peter 1 v 1-12," Proclamation Trust Younger Ministers Conference 2013, www.proctrust.org.uk/dls/YMC2013-01-01.mp3.

These are all different facets of the same truth: preaching is so much more than simply a process of education. It is capturing affections for Christ. We can do no better than the definition of the Puritan Cotton Mather. He said the aim of preaching was “to restore the throne and dominion of God in the hearts of men.”¹

Affections and emotions

By affections we do not simply mean *emotions*. It's great when someone has an emotional response to a sermon. But it's not a good measure of God's work. A comedian can make people laugh and a good story-teller can make them cry. We're after more than laughter and tears. Our affections are the motives that drive our behaviour and emotions—our desires, convictions, hopes, fears and longings. The Bible summarises this with its focus on the heart.

The heart in the Bible represents our desires and beliefs. Proverbs 4 v 23 says: “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life” (ESV). In other words, our behaviour and emotions flow out of our hearts. Jesus, too, says behaviour comes “from within, out of a person's heart” (Mark 7 v 20-23). So if we want our preaching truly to change behaviour then we need to ensure it first changes hearts. Behaviour follows belief. Otherwise we're just manipulating people and that's legalism. “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life” is not just key to living. It's also key to gospel-centred preaching.

So preaching is about capturing the affections of our heart for Christ so that our confidence is in Christ, and our longing is to know him and to see him glorified. Jesus said: “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.” (Matthew 13 v 44). The job of the preacher is to point the way to this treasure so that people give all they have to take hold of it. And that's not all. Our job is to point to the treasure that is ours in Christ so that people, like the man in the parable, do this *with joy*.

¹ Quoted in John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, Baker, 2nd Ed., 2004, p25.

What is preaching for?

In 2 Corinthians 4 v 5-6 Paul says: “For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.” *What is the goal of preaching?* It is that the light of God might shine in people’s hearts. It is that people might see the light of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

Consider the New Testament word “exhortation”. It implies so much more than the acquisition of more information. Or consider the word “heed”. To heed God’s word is not only to know it. Preaching is not simply a process of education. It’s a process of change.

And this is not just a matter of definitions. It makes a huge difference to how you approach preparing and delivering sermons or Bible talks. It means that when you reach the point where you’re confident you’ve understood the passage, you’re actually only halfway through your preparation. **It means that if all you’ve done is explain the passage, then you haven’t done your job.**

Working on the text and giving a message are not the same task. Of course they *are* closely related because doing good work in the text is the essential starting point to delivering a powerful biblical message. Good preaching is *never anything less* than Bible teaching. As Paul says, “We do not preach ourselves.” We’re not presenting human wisdom or depending on human eloquence. A few verses earlier he says: “We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.” (2 Corinthians 4 v 2). Good preaching always involves presenting the word of God plainly. The message and its applications have to be rooted in the text and flow from the text.

But good preaching is always *more than teaching*. We’re not just giving expository lectures. Working on the text and preaching a sermon have different goals. The aim of text work is understanding truth. What is God saying? Why is he saying it? How is he saying

it? What is his purpose? These are all important questions. But the aim of a sermon is to take us beyond simply understanding a text to adoration, thanksgiving, obedience and joy. Merely to know the truth is the position of the demons (James 2 v 19).

The key is to ask this question: what is the biblical author trying to *achieve* through this passage? And *how* is he trying to get the response he wants? This is different to asking *what* he is saying. The application of the passage (rather than comprehension of its content) is the *point* of the passage – and therefore the point of preaching the passage.

Most sermons mostly contain ideas that most of the congregation already know. So if you think of preaching primarily as communicating ideas, then most sermons are just a waste of time. Or you will see the preacher's job as being to unearth some fresh insight—however obscure or eccentric. You will go after novelty.

The main exception to most ideas already being known by the congregation is evangelistic sermons. But here it's even more important to capture the affections because unbelievers are not predisposed to accept what's being said. We need to make them want to believe so they're willing to give the time to engage with whether it really is true. With both believers and unbelievers the aim of preaching is for the word of God to capture people's hearts.



Ideas for action

Step One: Pursue God in his word until he moves your heart

When preparing, work on the text until it moves you. Begin by praying that the Holy Spirit would capture your affections through the word. It might be that the passage excites you or disturbs you or challenges you or comforts you. It might move you to adore Christ or fear God or confess your sin or speak of Christ boldly or obey its

commands. You might laugh, you might cry, you might tremble, you might shout for joy. But pursue God in his word until it moves you.

Step Two: Make your aim to move the hearts of your hearers in the same way

Take whatever it is in the text that moves your heart and present that to the congregation so their hearts are moved in a similar way. Not only will you be directing the passage to people's hearts, you'll also preach with the passion and conviction that come from the word having first impacted your heart. Of course, realistically you won't move all the people all the time! But unless you aim to capture people's affections for Christ, you'll probably end up moving none of the people none of the time.



Questions for reflection

John Stott describes five "paradoxes" of Christian preaching. He says it is:

1. Both **biblical** and **contemporary** (relating the ancient text to the modern context).
2. Both **authoritative** and **tentative** (distinguishing between the infallible word and its fallible interpreters).
3. Both **prophetic** and **pastoral** (combining faithfulness with gentleness).
4. Both **gifted** and **studied** (necessitating a divine gift and human self-discipline).
5. Both **thoughtful** and **passionate** (letting the heart burn as Christ opens to us the scriptures).¹

? For each of these paradoxes, on which side are you strongest or weakest?

¹ John Stott, *The Living Church*, IVP, 2007, p116.