

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: A Homiletical Model

By David A. Glock

As we consider the need for expository preaching in this issue of Journey, it will be beneficial for us to consider the great Sermon of the Savior delivered to His disciples at the beginning of the Galilean ministry. The teaching of the Sermon is not so much the consideration, but rather the structure and style employed for clear communication. The Sermon is a motivational sermon given to the disciples that addresses the realities of character and holiness required for a follower of Jesus. The Sermon begins by stating the benefits of being a true disciple of Jesus Christ (Introduction). It addresses the deeper requirements of the Law that exceed outward obedience (Section I). It addresses the inner attitudes of personal spirituality rather than external display (Section II). It addresses the demonstration of spiritual reality in the treatment of others (Section III). The Sermon concludes with an invitation—a call to action to apply the teachings of the Sermon to life (Conclusion).

Some observation:

1. There is a uniting theme to the entire sermon - A Big Idea
2. There is a clear introduction with a promise of blessing - Motivation
3. There are three main points to the Sermon - Clear Organization
4. There are summary statements to each section - Restatement
5. There is a clear conclusion with a call to action - Call to Action
6. There is repetitious wording for understanding - Memory Devices
7. There are numerous illustrations for clarity - Casual Clarification

The following samples will illustrate these observations:

1. Uniting Theme

“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:17, 20).

2. Clear Introduction

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt. 5:5, 8).

3. Clear Organization

Point One: Attitude to Law: Matthew 5

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire” (vv. 21-22).

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (vv. 27□28).

“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.’ But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne” (vv. 33□34).

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (vv. 43□44).

Point Two: Attitude to Self: Matthew 6

“Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven” (v. 1).

“And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward” (v. 5).

“And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words” (v. 7).

“Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward” (v. 16).

Point Three - Attitude to Others: Matthew 7

“Judge not, that you be not judged” (v. 1).

“Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces” (v. 6).

4. Summary Statement

Section One: Attitude to Law

“Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (5:48).

Section Two: Attitude to Self

“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (6:33□34).

Section Three: Attitude to Others

“Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (7:12).

5. Call to Action

“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it” (7:13).

“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock” (7:24).

“But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand” (7:26).

6. Repetition of Words

“Blessed are...” (5:3).

“Blessed are...” (v. 4).

“Blessed are...” (v. 5).

“Blessed are...” (v. 6).

“Blessed are...” (v. 7).

“Blessed are...” (v. 8).

“Blessed are...” (v. 9).

“Blessed are...” (v. 10).

“Blessed are...” (v. 11).

“You have heard that it was said...” (5:21).

“You have heard that it was said...” (v. 27).

“Again you have heard that it was said...” (v. 33).

“You have heard that it was said...” (v. 38).

“You have heard that it was said...” (v. 43).

7. Numerous Illustrations

“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men” (5:14).

“You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden” (5:14).

“Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (6:26).

“So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin” (6:28).

“And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?” (7:3).

“Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces” (7:6).

“Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent?” (7:10).

Thus, in this wonderful Sermon by the Lord Jesus concerning true discipleship, we also have a beautiful sermon model to follow. Remember:

BIG IDEA □ MOTIVATION □ CLEAR ORGANIZATION □ RESTATEMENT □
CALL TO ACTION □ MEMORY DEVICES □ ILLUSTRATIONS

Put the Cookies Back On the Upper Shelf: Returning Systematic, Expository Preaching to the Local Church

By Dr. Charles C. Ryrie

I. What Is Expository Preaching?

Before listing some values in systematic expository preaching, it is necessary to be sure we are on the same page in understanding the terms. “Systematic,” according to a dictionary definition, means methodical and is characterized by thoroughness and regularity. It emphasizes the need to preach expository messages almost always. Of course there will be occasions when it is advisable to inject a topical or special-occasion message which may not be expository. It also reminds us to feed our people a balanced biblical diet. We all have favorite doctrines and parts of the Bible, but we need to resist the temptation always to talk about our favorites.

“Preaching” has the idea of proclaiming or setting forth ideas in a sermon or presentation. Various relevant words in the New Testament include the ideas of translating (Acts 9:36; Lk. 24:27), giving the meaning (Acts 8:35), announcing the gospel (Lk. 2: 10), and doing this correctly (2 Tim. 2: 15—used of cutting a path in a straight direction so a traveler could go directly to his destination).

“Expository” means to set forth the meaning of a writing in careful and often elaborate detail. It means to explain, expound, set forth, set, put, expose. Thus expository preaching translates the meaning of a text into clear and detailed explanatory language. Bible exposition may be of a passage, theme, or subject in the Bible. Exposition is not application, though it is the basis for application. Nor is it finding principles in a passage that are often imported from another part of the Bible. In its purest form expository preaching clearly translates the meaning of a passage into the language of the hearers.

II. What Are the Tools for Expository Preaching?

The historical setting of the passage(s). The historical setting for the book of Haggai illuminates the various “calls” in the book. The significance and content of Daniel's prayer recorded in Daniel 9 grows out of the historical setting described in the first two verses. Passages in the New Testament concerning various taxes must be carefully distinguished from each other. Passages which command obedience to governments need to describe the governments that are to be obeyed.

The context. I had a teacher who constantly reminded us that it is always safe to read the context. Ignoring the context may result in a skewed if not false interpretation. First Corinthians 2:9 often is used at funerals to describe heaven. Actually, I recently read one well-known evangelical who was at the point of death and who declared he soon would be experiencing that verse. But read the immediate context—the very next verse: God has revealed these things to us by the Spirit. Has revealed now, not will reveal at death.

Careful exegesis is an absolute essential for biblical exposition. Many passages are clear and the exegesis is fairly obvious. With such be sure you have discovered everything the passage says and be careful not to add things that are not there. Don't miss anything and don't add anything. More than one legitimate exegesis may be possible with other passages. In some cases one's theology will decide which exegesis is preferable. Hebrews 6:6 and James 2:26 serve as examples. In other cases good exegesis may allow for two interpretations to be legitimate. In 2 Corinthians 5:14 both my love for Christ and Christ's love for me are accurate depending on whether the genitive is subjective (my love for Christ) or objective (Christ's love for me). Why not include both ideas that constrain me to witness (note verse 11 in the context)? If one does not know the original languages (or has gotten rusty!) a number of helps are available to guarantee solid exegesis—exegetical commentaries, concordances, Bible dictionaries, interlinear and other translations.

Focus and build on a theme. No law exists that requires only one theme per message. Neither does a law that requires you to squeeze a long passage into one theme. A single verse, a paragraph, a section, even an entire Bible book may be handled under one theme or several. One period during the early days of my ministry I preached to a congregation made up exclusively of junior-age boys and girls (ages 9-12). This was a church service for juniors, not a junior church; therefore the message was to be a solid biblical one (no story telling!). In the fearlessness and naivety of youth, I decided to preach Romans. Two things made it work. One was to have the kids bring and open their Bibles to the text. Thankfully, these were days before projecting the text on a screen or the second idea would not have worked. The second was to build my sermons on specific words in the biblical text and to encourage the kids to underline those words. This gave the kids something to hold (their Bibles) and something to do (underline and thus to be attentive to the message). Often parents would tell me what the sermon was because their kids would remember those words and the message built on them.

Define terms clearly. Remember a good definition will work in all uses of the word. An English dictionary provides good help in defining biblical and theological terms; e.g., ephod, tumbriel, church, Pentecost, mystery.

III. What Are Some Pitfalls in Expository Preaching?

Be wary of reaching for principles. If a principle emerges from the text, fine; if you import and impose it from outside the text (even though it is biblical), be wary. Finding principles is often justified by starting with something we deem the audience needs, then seeking a text which seemingly supports it. But often, perhaps usually, the support is something limited while the principle is more universal. An example: an evangelical preacher desiring to encourage prayer support for his city used Abraham's pleading with God to spare Sodom if there were 10 righteous persons in it (Gen. 18:32). The principle he concluded was to promise protection for his city (and any others) if God could find 10 righteous people in it. Indeed, he went on to suggest that bands of 10 righteous people should be formed within areas of a city. Prayer for a neighborhood, city, or country is certainly in order, but a blanket promise of being spared is a reach. As you read this, please do not try to think of other passages that would support the concept. They, too, may have to be unbiblically stretched if they try to be universalized.

Be careful not to offer false promises which are not in the text itself. One favorite misuse of such is 2 Chronicles 7:14 where healing the land is promised if people repent. But specifically what land? The land of Israel. But doesn't the principle apply to every nation? No. It is good and pleasing to God for citizens to repent, but there is no guarantee that such will prolong the existence of that nation.

Always be sure an accurate exegetical base exists in the text for the principle. Also the principle must be in accord with the context, immediate and wider. Sometimes this requires balancing one principle with another that may teach the opposite. For example, God does deliver people from various difficulties (Gen. 50:20) but not always (Rev. 11:36-37).

Be wary of a false mystical interpretation of the text. Do not look for hidden meanings or deeper interpretations. Such may turn off the listeners from their own study of the Word simply because they cannot find such meanings.

What about applying the text? Certainly good exposition will include the aspect of change hopefully in the hearer. But since the basis and goal of change is in the biblical text, that must be given expertly and prominently. Often the application of the text to contemporary living will be obvious. After all, the needs and problems in people's and churches' lives are not that different today from those in biblical times. To be effective any application must be received favorably by the listener. Further, there may be more than one application from a text, and the one I thought of is not necessarily the only one. And always remember that the Holy Spirit knows everything about every listener and knows what he or she needs. True, I may also know, but equally true, I may not know.

Therefore, I preach the Word and know that the Spirit will apply it tailor-made for each listener. Some will accept His promptings; sadly, others will not.

We have the great privilege of handling God's inerrant Word. Handle it accurately, consistently, and passionately. Trust the Holy Spirit to use it in the lives of those who hear it.

Some of this material has been adapted from my book, *Ryrie's Practical Guide to Communicating Bible Doctrine* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2005)

Love Wins—or Jesus Rescues?

By Dr. Larry Dixon

Note: This article is adapted from Dr. Dixon's presentation at the 2011's Iron Sharpens Iron conference at Emmaus Bible College. His book, *Farewell, Rob Bell: A Biblical Response to Love Wins*, is available through Amazon.com.

Rob Bell, mega-church pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Michigan and producer of the Nooma video series, recently released a book entitled *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (HarperOne, 2011).

His book, and the promo video, dumped evangelicals on their heads. Here is the text of the promo video which caused such a stir:

“Several years ago we had an art show at our church and people brought in all kinds of sculptures and paintings, and they put them on display. And there was this one piece that had a quote from Ghandi in it. And lots of people found this piece compelling. They'd stop and sort of stare at it and take it in and reflect on it. But not everyone found it that compelling. Somewhere in the course of the art show, somebody attached a handwritten note to the piece and on the note they had written: 'Reality check. He's in hell!' Ghandi's in hell? He is? And someone knows this for sure? And felt the need to let the rest of us know? Will only a few select people make it to heaven? And will billions and billions of people burn forever in hell? And if that's the case—how do you become one of the few? Is it what you believe, or what you say, or what you do, or who you know, or something that happens in your heart? Or do you need to be initiated or baptized or take a class or be converted or be born again? How does one become one of these 'few'? And then there is the question behind the questions. The real question: What is God like? Because millions and millions of people were taught that the primary message, the center of the gospel of Jesus, is that God is going to send you to hell unless you believe in Jesus. And so what gets suddenly sort of caught and taught is that Jesus rescues you from God. But what kind of God is that that we would need to be rescued from this God? How could that God ever be good? How could that God ever be trusted? And how could that ever be 'good news'? This is why lots of people want nothing to do with the Christian faith. They see it as an endless list of absurdities and inconsistencies and they say, 'Why would I ever want to be a part of that?'

See, what we believe about heaven and hell is incredibly important because it exposes what we believe about who God is and what God is like. What you discover in the Bible is so surprising—unexpectedly beautiful—that whatever we've been told or taught, the Good News is actually better than that! Better than we could ever imagine. The Good News is that LOVE WINS!"

We will make some comments about this script later, but we must also include the text from the back of the book which reads:

“☐ God loves us.
God offers us everlasting life by grace, freely,
through no merit on our part.
Unless you do not respond the right way.
Then God will torture you forever.
In hell. ☐
Huh?”

The promo video and the book have divided the evangelical world into the pro-Bellums and the anti-Bellums, those who either praise him for his courageous viewpoint or castigate him for his hip heresy.

My Purposes in This Article:

I would really like to accomplish three goals: First, I'd like to remind us that we have a responsibility to “prove all things—[to] hold fast to that which is good” (1 Th. 5:21, KJV). I really like the Luther Bible's translation of this verse which says, “prüfet aber alles, und das Gute behaltet.” Absolutely. We should!

Christians should be marked by a critical mind, but not by a critical spirit. The Bible teaches that there is a faith, a content of truth which we need to understand, enjoy, and defend (Jude 3). The apostle Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 4:16 to “watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

Believers in Jesus Christ will be asked their opinion of Bell's Love Wins. Reading the book for yourself will give you a certain measure of credibility, but read it carefully! We need to encourage the reading of not only the Word of God and solid Christian books, but also of material that challenges our Christian assumptions and convictions. One writer, in expressing his concern with our increasingly visual culture, asks, “Will this generation be one that ‘thinks with their emotions and listens with their eyes’?”

Wanting to “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15) means that I should have no interest in Bell-bashing, and neither should you. But I do have an interest in being like the Berean believers who used the Scriptures to evaluate what the apostle Paul said (Acts 17).

The second goal of this article is to answer the question, Who is Rob Bell and why should I care? Bell is the pastor of a large church in Michigan, Mars Hill Bible Church (not to be confused with Mark Driscoll's church in Seattle), and is a graduate of Wheaton College and Fuller Seminary. He is the producer of the Nooma video series and author of *Velvet Elvis*, *Sex God*, and other books, and is the co-author of *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*.

In this recent book Bell seems to push the viewpoint known as universalism, the belief that all without exception will ultimately be saved. If that viewpoint is unbiblical, you and I should care enough to respond to his teaching on this topic.

The third goal of this article is to ask, What does Love Wins say, how should we respond? Although I am glad he has raised questions about the eternal fate of the lost, if his answers do not line up with Scripture, he is leading his readers astray and needs to be corrected.

Bell's Advocacy of Universalism:

In a number of places in *Love Wins*, Bell uses language which makes it hard to defend him from the charge of arguing for universalism. For example, in discussing the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, he suggests that it is actually a story of hope and redemption for all (see pp. 83-85)! He writes, "No matter how painful, brutal, oppressive, no matter how far people find themselves from home because of their sin, indifference, and rejection, there's always the assurance that it won't be this way forever" (p. 86).

Bell clearly sides with a remedial, rather than a retributive, view of hell. The retributive view suggests that sinners will be punished eternally as an expression of God's holy wrath and justice. The remedial view says that hell can be a school from which the sinner may graduate. Bell says, "Failure, we see again and again, isn't final, judgment has a point, and consequences are for correction" (p. 88).

In discussing the story of the lost coin, sheep, and son in Luke 15, Bell says, "The God that Jesus teaches us about doesn't give up until everything that was lost is found. This God simply doesn't give up. Ever" (p. 101). This theme of God not "giving up" is returned to several times in *Love Wins*. For example, Bell asks the question, "Have billions of people been created only to spend eternity in conscious punishment and torment, suffering infinitely for the finite sins they committed in the few years they spent on earth? . . . in the end, will God give up?" (p. 102).

Bell shows great respect for those like Origen who have advocated universalism, arguing for that viewpoint as a legitimate one in Christian thought. He writes, "there are others who [are] . . . trusting that there will be endless opportunities in an endless amount of time for people to say yes to God. As long as it takes, in other words" (pp. 106-107).

He suggests that the real problem is time: God simply needs to use eternity to reach some people. Bell writes, “Given enough time, everybody will turn to God and find themselves in the joy and peace of God’s presence. The love of God will melt every hard heart, and even the most depraved sinners will eventually give up their resistance and turn to God” (p. 107).

For those who want to defend Bell against the charge of universalism (which he has publicly denied), their task is made more difficult by statements like these: “Within this proper, larger understanding of just what the Jesus story even is, we see that Jesus himself, again and again, demonstrates how seriously he takes his role in saving and rescuing and redeeming not just everything, but everybody” (pp. 150-151). “What Jesus does is declare that he, and he alone, is saving everybody” (p. 155).

The Irrelevance of Personal Faith:

Bell implies that the work of salvation for all is done and that our trusting in Christ, in the gospel, has no effect on our receiving the benefits of His work. Bell uses the Luke 15 story to prove that it is a story of integration, not separation! (pp. 169-170). “The father’s love cannot be earned, and it cannot be taken away. It just is” (p. 187). “Our trusting, our change of heart, our believing God’s version of our story doesn’t bring it into existence, make it happen, or create it. It simply is” (p. 188).

One of the favorite passages of universalists is Jesus’ cry of forgiveness from the cross. Bell also uses this text to support his view. Referring to Christ’s statement on the cross of “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” Bell says, “Jesus forgives them all, without their asking for it. Done. Taken care of. Before we could be good enough or right enough, before we could even believe the right things” (p. 189).

God Getting What God Wants?

As a master of questions, Bell refers to 1 Timothy 2’s statement that God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to a knowledge of the truth. In his chapter entitled “Does God Get What God Wants?” Bell asks, “Will all people be saved, or will God not get what God wants?” (p. 98). “In the Bible, God is not helpless, God is not powerless, and God is not impotent” (p. 101). “Will all the ends of the earth come, as God has decided, or only some? Will all feast as it’s promised in Psalm 22, or only a few? Will everybody be given a new heart, or only a limited number of people? Will God, in the end, settle, saying, ‘Well, I tried. I gave it my best shot, and sometimes you just have to be okay with failure?’ Will God shrug God-size shoulders and say, ‘You can’t always get what you want?’” (p. 103).

God’s very greatness is dependent on whether God gets what God wants. Bell writes: “How great is God? Great enough to achieve what God sets out to do, or kind of great, medium great, great most of the time, but in this, the fate of billions of people, not totally great. Sort of great. A little great” (pp. 97-98).

Bell's Escape Clauses:

To be fair, there are several places where he seems to deny universalism. He says, for example, "Love demands freedom. It always has, and it always will. We are free to resist, reject, and rebel against God's ways for us. We can have all the hell we want" (p. 113). But we must not be deceived by his use of the term "hell" here. It is unlikely that he means eternal separation from God after this life.

The Bigger Question Bell Raises:

Apart from the issue of whether Bell himself advocates universalism, the larger question is, Should universalism be considered a legitimate option in evangelical Christianity? Is that position biblical defensible? Several considerations must be kept in mind in responding to this increasingly-popular "option."

1. There are no biblical texts which support the idea of after-death opportunities to hear and respond to the gospel. Some wish to take 1 Peter 3's reference to Christ's preaching to the spirits in prison (as well as Christ's so-called "descent into hell" statement in the Apostles' Creed) as support for post-mortem conversion, but the biblical text does not support this view. Death ends all opportunities for conversion. Therefore we need to get the gospel to people before they die. Such passages as Hebrews 9:27 ("it is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment") and John 8:24 ("If you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins") do not portray death as providing God with innumerable opportunities to persuade the lost to believe the gospel.
2. Universalism was condemned as heresy at the Fifth General Council of Constantinople in A.D. 553.
3. Universalistic-sounding texts (like Philippians 2 and Colossians 1) do not support the viewpoint that all will be saved when carefully analyzed. Philippians 2, for example, portrays a forced acknowledgment of Christ by the lost.
4. Those who advocate universalism must minimize the final authority of Scripture, and especially the teachings of the Lord Jesus, to hold their view.
5. Universalism makes no sense of texts like the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16, the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 (v. 46: "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life"), or the description of the eternal state in Revelation 20—21.
6. Universalism eviscerates the gospel and the need for evangelism and world missions. Why should Christians go to other countries, learn difficult foreign languages and cultures, and eat what human beings were never intended to eat, if all will eventually be saved? Universalism makes a mockery of Christian

martyrdom. Why lay down one's life if eternal, post-mortem opportunities for conversion will be given?

I agree with Kevin DeYoung when he writes, "According to Bell, salvation is realizing you're already saved. We are all forgiven. We are all loved, equally and fully by God who has made peace with everyone....Bell is saying God has already forgiven us whether we ask for it or not, whether we repent and believe or not, whether we are born again or not....Bell categorically rejects any notion of penal substitution. It simply does not work in his system or with his view of God....At the very heart of this controversy...is that we really do have two different Gods. The stakes are that high. If Bell is right, then historic orthodoxy is toxic and terrible. But if the traditional view of heaven and hell are right, Bell is blaspheming. I do not use the word lightly, just like Bell probably chose 'toxic' quite deliberately. Both sides cannot be right."

(<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/03/14/rob--bell--love---wins---review/>).

Summary Comments and Areas Evangelicals Should Work On:

Before concluding our article, we must make some comments about Bell's promo video. If Ghandi died without Jesus Christ, then, yes, he is in hell. And, yes, one needs to be born again to become one of the redeemed "few." Does Jesus rescue us from God? Scripture is clear that He rescues us from God's wrath (1 Th. 1:10). What kind of God would need to be rescued from? Answer: a thrice-holy God. The Good News is that God Himself in the Person of His Son provides a ransom for those who believe.

The back cover text mocks the gospel and implies that God tortures people simply for not responding in the right way. This minimizes unbelief and the price Christ paid to save us from our sins.

There are a number of areas where evangelicals need to do work:

1. What is the gospel?
2. How essential is belief in the gospel now? How does biblical belief differ from mere opinion?
3. Does God owe anyone salvation? If so, how does that relate to His mercy?
4. What about those who have never heard? (Bell's scheme as a kind of theodicy?)
5. What can we profitably learn from classic and neo-liberalism? What are the dangers?
6. Are labels always libelous? When, if ever, should we use the term "heretic"?
7. What is the relationship between social concerns and the sharing the gospel?

8. What exactly did Jesus accomplish on the cross?
9. What is the role of questions in gaining a deeper understanding of theology? Are all questions innocent and honest? (What about the devil's in Genesis 3?) What is the value of clarity?
10. How should we deal with false teachers in a fragmented world where no one is held accountable and no one ever gets excluded for any reason?
11. What exegetical work remains to be done on the universalistic-sounding passages?
12. How do we stand against our celebrity-obsessed culture? Who influences us and why are we influenced by them?
13. How can we learn to engage in vigorous theological thinking without resorting to caricaturing or compromise?
14. Is the overall teaching of the Word of God one-ness or two-ness (that is, is there only one eternal destiny for all, or two possibilities)?
15. What work needs to be done on the wrath of God?
16. What is our understanding of the biblical view of death?

May the Lord help us do our work and stand strong for the once-for-all-delivered-to-the-saints' faith.

Act In The Spirit
By Alexander Strauch

But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

Galatians 5:15

Chapel Hill Church, a large, Bible-believing church, invited an evangelist for a week of special messages. At the end of the week, the evangelist challenged the congregation to develop a deeper devotion to Christ and to be more committed to sharing the gospel. Then—without showiness, coercion, or endless appeals—he invited people to come to the front of the auditorium and kneel with him in prayer. His messages had touched many people's hearts and they responded to his invitation.

But this church was not accustomed to altar calls, and as the meeting ended a prominent church member expressed to all within earshot his disagreement with the

evangelist's altar call. His loud, angry words and facial expressions shocked those around him. He accused the evangelist of unscriptural practices and emotional manipulation. He even threatened to leave the church if the leadership did not deal immediately with the situation.

Upon hearing the angry man's accusations, some people jumped to defend the evangelist. They saw that God had used the evangelist to revive their spiritually dry church and supported his challenge to greater evangelism. They accused those who opposed the altar call of being narrow-minded traditionalists who always resisted change. They also accused them of being insensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading and of not caring for the lost.

Other people sided with the angry complainer, claiming that the evangelist was preaching a gospel of easy-believism. They made slanderous remarks about the evangelist's motives and character and labeled anyone who agreed with him as "liberal." They also attacked the church leaders, saying that they lacked spiritual discernment. They went so far as to ask the church leadership to resign, claiming that they had "sinned" against the church by inviting a wolf in sheep's clothing to preach.

Soon gossip and rumors lit up the phone lines. Past grievances against one another were rekindled, and hurtful accusations flew in every direction. Angry, inflammatory speech became the mode of communication. Misinformation, fear, suspicion, and distrust abounded. Friends and family members were recruited to choose sides. The church leadership communicated poorly with the congregation and the anger and hatred escalated.

Within a year, Chapel Hill Church split into two separate groups. Each group claimed to be defending God's truth. There was no desire on the part of either group to seek reconciliation. They were happy to be done with one another.

Although the name Chapel Hill Church and this account are both fictional, the behavior attributed to this church is not. The description of the fight at Chapel Hill Church is not an exaggeration. It reflects the attitudes and behaviors seen in countless other church fights and splits.

Regardless of our theological view of altar calls, we should be able to agree that the behavior of these Christian believers showed total disregard for nearly every biblical command concerning Christian conduct and speech. They behaved like people who knew nothing of the gospel and the Holy Spirit. They acted more like spoiled, ill-mannered children than mature, Spirit-indwelt believers.

Seeing the disastrous effects of such conflicts should compel us to ask, "How are Bible-believing Christians who are indwelt by God's Spirit and in possession of the guidance of God's Word to handle their disagreements?" No group of people should be as well equipped to handle conflict as Bible-believing Christians. The Bible provides detailed instructions for handling conflict constructively. Christ provides the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to obey God's Word and to control our sinful passions.

The theme of this chapter is foundational to the rest of the book: *When conflict arises, our attitudes and behaviors should reflect our new life in Christ given by the Holy Spirit who lives within us. We are to display the fruit of the Spirit and not the works of the flesh. We are to walk in step with the Spirit's leading. We are to be Spirit-controlled and not flesh-controlled or out of control.* Let us examine this foundational principle as it is expressed in Galatians 5:13-26; 1 Corinthians 3:1-4; and James 3:13-18. These three

passages of Scripture form the bedrock upon which much of this book rests. The next two chapters address love and humility, two preeminent fruits of the Spirit.

1. WHEN FACING CONFLICT, DO NOT DISPLAY “THE WORKS OF THE FLESH”

Much of the contentious infighting and unnecessary divisions that plague many churches today result from believers acting according to the flesh and not walking by the Spirit. This was true of some of the New Testament churches as well. Recognizing the potential harm of such behavior, Paul, the apostle, addressed the problem in his letters to the churches of Galatia and Corinth.

a. Sinful Conflict in the Churches of Galatia

Serious discord over the role of the Mosaic Law in regard to salvation and Christian living threatened the life and unity of the newly planted churches of Galatia.¹ So Paul, one of the founders of these churches, warned the new believers:

But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. (Gal. 5:15)

Their conduct, writes one commentator, was “more fitting to wild animals than to brothers in Christ.”² If these new Christian believers did not stop fighting, no one would survive the carnage.

After Paul warns of the potential for mutual destruction within the believing community, he identifies the cause as “the works of the flesh.”³

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, *impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.* (Galatians 5:19-21; italics added)

The eight social sins italicized above describe sinful attitudes and behaviors displayed among the Galatian believers. It is likely that you have seen many of these behaviors displayed in your own church experience. As you consider these eight “works of the flesh,” know this: The Holy Spirit is absolutely opposed to each of them.⁴ Verse 17 states, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other.” The Holy Spirit does not lead believers to commit these social sins: to bite and devour one another or to provoke one another to fits of anger or bitter jealousy.

Paul also warns that conceit (or pride) is at the root of many of these base, sinful behaviors:

Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another. (Gal. 5:26)

Conceit led some of the Galatians to arrogantly provoke others into angry, theological debates in order to prove their superior knowledge. In other cases, conceit led believers to envy those who threatened their self-importance. So instead of “through love [serving] one another” as brothers and sisters in Christ (Gal. 5:13), the Galatians were provoking and envying one another.

Paul’s catalog of social vices stands as an objective check to our behavior. So the next time you are involved in conflict, stop and think. You know you are yielding to “the desires of the flesh” if any of the above sinful vices are displayed in your behavior or attitude.

When the brother in our opening story about Chapel Hill Church spewed out angry accusations against the evangelist, for example, he obviously was yielding to “the desires of the flesh” rather than to the Spirit’s leading. When other believers started to divide into contending factions and to feel hostility toward one another, they were displaying rivalry and enmity. These sinful works of the flesh showed clearly that they were not yielding to “the desires of the Spirit.”

b. Sinful Conflict in the Church at Corinth

Christians in the church at Corinth also exhibited the sinful “works of the flesh” and experienced disruptive conflict. In fact, “there was not another church founded by Paul, as far as we know, that was so plagued by sin and division.”⁵ The Corinthian believers had the Holy Spirit, yet in behavior and attitude were like people who are devoid of the Spirit. David Garland comments that they acted “no differently from the rest of Corinthian society.”⁶ In other words, they were a worldly minded group of Christians.

In his letter to this strife-torn church, Paul puts his finger on the problem:

... you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human? (1 Cor. 3:3-4)

Although the Corinthians prided themselves on their spirituality and knowledge, their quarrels, jealousies, and factiousness proved that they were not walking by the Spirit. They possessed abundant gifts of the Spirit but lacked the graces of the Spirit. Their manner of life was inconsistent with that of people who profess to walk by the Spirit and represent the truths of the gospel.

So in 2 Corinthians 12:20, Paul lists eight sins of discord among the Corinthians that, if continued, would require severe apostolic discipline: “quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.” This list of eight social sins is similar to the list in Galatians 5:19-21. All these social sins are evidence of “the works of the flesh” that result in much conflict. There could be no hope for unity in the church at Corinth until believers acknowledged and repented of their fleshly, unChristlike conduct.

2. WHEN FACING CONFLICT, DISPLAY “THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT”

God has always wanted his people to live in a way that would demonstrate his holy character to the unbelieving world. As people who are born of God's Spirit, each believer is a "new creation" in Christ (Gal. 6:15) who is to handle conflict in a radically different way from that of the flesh-driven world.⁷ *The one thing Christian believers are not to do when engaged in conflict is to revert back to our old, pre-conversion, flesh-driven ways of behavior.*⁸

a. Walk by the Spirit

The Christian life begins the moment a person receives the Holy Spirit of God and experiences a profound, radical life transformation. The difference between the old life before conversion and the new life after conversion is analogous to the difference between death and life or between living in light and living in utter darkness.⁹ This new life is to be continued by means of faith in God's Word and dependence on the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

Paul assumes that his Galatian readers have believed the gospel and have been born again by the Spirit. However, he reproves them for not living consistently by the Spirit's power and direction. Many of them were trying to live the Christian life in their own strength by following the Old Testament laws of Moses rather than living by the power of the Spirit. Therefore, his response to the interpersonal conflicts and erroneous views of Christian living among the Galatian believers was to tell them to "walk by the Spirit," that is, to be "led by" or "live by" the Spirit:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. . . . But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. . . . If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. (Gal. 5:16, 18, 25)

This passage is one of the most significant passages in the New Testament for instruction on how to live the Christian life. It is, as one theologian says, "theological dynamite."¹⁰ Walking by the Spirit requires an active, step-by-step, daily effort to live the Christian life by means of the presence and enabling power of the Holy Spirit. *Nothing but the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is sufficient to enable believers to resist the desires of the flesh and to live the Christlike life.*

b. Display Christlike Character by the Fruit of the Spirit

The Holy Spirit seeks to form Christlike character qualities in the life of every individual Christian and every local church body. These Christlike qualities promote right attitudes, godly conduct, and healthy human relationships—the very qualities the strife-torn congregations in Galatia desperately needed. Paul's nine descriptions of "the fruit of the Spirit" form a composite picture of Christlike character and conduct: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Gal. 5:22-23). We know that we are walking by the Spirit when we see "the fruit of the Spirit" displayed in our daily conduct and inner attitudes.¹¹

One commentator writes that this fruit is "nothing less than the practical reproduction of the character (and therefore the conduct) of Christ in [the] lives of his

people.”¹² “The fruit of the Spirit,” then, provides an objective guide to our attitudes and behavior when dealing with conflict. So we should always ask ourselves: “Am I displaying Christlike character and the life of the Spirit when I deal with disagreement or someone who opposes me?” Hopefully we should be able to answer: “Yes!” “It is tragic,” states Donald Guthrie, “that church life has often been wrecked through failure to observe the responsibilities of walking in the Spirit.”¹³

When caught in a storm of conflict, one fruit of the Spirit that is especially needed to navigate safely through the storm is “self-control” (Gal. 5:23). *Lack of self-control is a major problem during conflict, but the Holy Spirit provides power over the fleshly excesses generated by the passions of anger, jealousy, hatred, and the spirit of revenge.* Christian believers who control their emotions and thinking by the power of the Spirit are best able to handle conflict constructively and bring about a just resolution. They are Christians who don’t bite and devour their brothers and sisters in Christ.

In contrast, when people act according to the flesh, they are out-of-control emotionally. They do not display the fruit of the Spirit and have the potential to do terrible damage to other people and to the name of Christ. Such was the case at Chapel Hill Church. Outsiders would never know that the Spirit of the living Christ dwelt in the hearts of the people there. The people at Chapel Hill Church did not walk in a manner worthy of the gospel, nor did they appear to be new creations in Christ. Instead, anger, pride, revenge, and slander characterized the believers at Chapel Hill Church. It was only a matter of time before they would all be “consumed by one another.”

3. WHEN FACING CONFLICT, DISPLAY “THE WISDOM FROM ABOVE”

James, our Lord’s half-brother, gives sound advice regarding conflict among Christian believers. He writes about two kinds of wisdom that are particularly important to recognize when dealing with conflict:

But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. (James 3:14-17)

First there is “the wisdom from above,” which is from God’s Spirit. It produces purity of heart and mind, sweet reasonableness, graciousness, mercy, sincerity, and peace (James 3:17). Then there is the wisdom from below, which “is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.” It produces uncontrolled speech, bitter jealousy,¹⁴ selfish ambition, unbridled passions, strife, pride, “disorder and every vile practice” (James 3:2-4:6).

When we experience heated disagreements with fellow Christians, we should use James 3 to guide our conduct and speech because it directly addresses controlling the fiery tongue and defines proper Christian conduct. Without such wisdom, we are at great risk to “bite and devour one another.”

In one church, for example, some people jumped to their feet to high-five one another, hoot, and rejoice immediately after the congregation narrowly and contentiously

voted to fire the pastor. They didn't seem to care that the pastor's children stood nearby, looking on as people celebrated the ousting of their father from his position. What impact do you think such behavior had on their view of Christian people and life in the church?

How does God view such behavior? We only have to read James 3:15 to learn that such behavior reflects the wisdom from below and "is earthly, unspiritual, demonic." Such behavior produces "disorder and every vile practice" within the church family. The winners may have won their election and ousted the pastor, but at the judgment seat of Christ, God will have the last word on their "success."¹⁵

4. LEARNING TO HANDLE DISAGREEMENT AS A SPIRIT-CONTROLLED CHRISTIAN

Conflict presents one of the toughest challenges to walking by the Spirit. If only we would recognize that every conflict is a test as to whether or not we will display Christlike character, the wisdom from above, and the reality of the gospel in our lives.¹⁶ If only the believers who ousted their pastor had recognized the test and sought to conform their attitudes to the wisdom from above. If only the believers at Chapel Hill Church had recognized the test and been as concerned about their sinful attitudes and conduct as they were about altar calls. Incredibly, believers in both cases were willing to act sinfully and unbiblically in order to "win" or prove themselves "right." They did not seem to care that they were grieving the Holy Spirit of God by acting according to "the works of the flesh," which the New Testament clearly denounces.

In many church disputes, believers fight for so-called truths that are not explicitly revealed in Scripture while egregiously violating the clear and repeated teaching of Scripture on godly conduct and attitudes. This chapter began, for example, with the story of the brother who made an angry outburst after an evangelist's altar call. He, and the members and leaders of Chapel Hill Church, displayed "the works of the flesh" rather than "the fruit of the Spirit" as they dealt with the issue. What could they have done differently to keep in step with the Spirit and the instructions of our Lord Jesus Christ?

a. Pray

As soon as the man realized that he was emotionally upset, he should have asked his heavenly Father for wisdom and self-control. If he had prayed "in the Spirit,"¹⁷ the Holy Spirit would have brought to mind specific scriptural passages—ones he had read many times—about how a Spirit-led believer thinks and acts when emotionally upset. In fact, all the members of Chapel Hill Church needed to pray for the Spirit's guidance before taking action.

Prayer is essential to walking by the Spirit. Through prayer, the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin and moves us to confess and amend our ways. The sinful attitudes and behaviors of people on both sides indicate that they did not sincerely trust God's instructions or the Spirit's power. Rather, the angry man and the other members of the church took matters into their own hands, ultimately letting their flesh dictate their behavior.

b. Check Our Attitudes and Conduct

God does not lead his people to “bite and devour one another” like wild animals. As well-taught Christians, the angry brother and other members of Chapel Hill should have *checked their attitudes and conduct by the rule of God’s Word which the Spirit always uses to direct the Lord’s people*. They should have recognized that they were yielding to “the desires of the flesh” and displaying “the works of the flesh” and the wisdom from below. They should have recognized that anger was rising up and vying for control and that they must exercise extra caution in order to prevent uncontrolled anger from becoming a golden opportunity for the devil to do his destructive work (Eph. 4:27).

They needed to renounce all gossip and slander against the evangelist and inflammatory accusations against one another. These behaviors could not be justified by the excuse that they were fighting for the truth because their behavior contradicted the truth. They had lost all balanced perspective on what is most important. Altar calls are not inherently sinful; what *is* sinful is giving free reign to unrestrained anger and hostility toward others. Everyone involved needed to wait until their emotions subsided and their minds cleared so that they could address the issue with Spirit-directed wisdom, patience, gentleness, reasonableness, and self-control.

c. Act in Love

Love would have moved the man to think first of the spiritual welfare of the people around him rather than his personal desire to make known his opinion and vent his anger. A loving, Christlike attitude would have said: “I don’t personally agree with altar calls, but I know that this evangelist preaches Christ crucified to many lost people. For that I thank God. I will get down on my knees and pray that the Spirit will use him to see many more people come to Christ.”¹⁸

Putting the welfare of others first is what it means to walk in love by the power of the Spirit. Instead, the believers of Chapel Hill Church did not act in love toward one another. They did not bear “with one another in love” (Eph. 4:2). They had knowledge of love (of which they were very proud!) but violated every New Testament principle of love.

d. Seek the Counsel of Spirit-filled Believers

Before the man condemned all altar calls, he should have sought the counsel of the church leaders. Scripture states that the Holy Spirit sets “overseers” in the flock to shepherd “the church of God” (Acts 20:28). The man did not consult with the church shepherds to express his concerns or to ask for their guidance. In fact, the church leaders should have invited people to talk with them if they had questions or had heard rumors that needed to be addressed.

Seeking counsel from other Spirit-filled believers is one way of being led by the Spirit. The people needed their leaders to remind them of proper Christian attitudes and behavior during stressful times of disagreement. They needed their leaders to warn them about the divisive sins of gossip and slander. It is unfortunate that the church leaders

failed to quickly acknowledge the problem and to present to the congregation a clear, constructive course of action (see Acts 6:1-3).

e. Treat Others with Kindness and Gentleness

The man who had a problem with the evangelist didn't seem to know the appropriate attitudes or manner by which to handle controversy among his fellow believers. Yet 2 Timothy 2:24-26 is quite clear:

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

Although the above passage applies directly to dealing with false teachers and their followers, it also serves as a guide for how we should treat fellow believers with whom we have doctrinal disagreement.

When the time was right, the man could have approached the evangelist and, without making accusations or attacking his motives, gently asked about his reasons for altar calls. He may have learned something from the evangelist; on the other hand, he may also have helped the evangelist. Perhaps both of them would have learned more of what it means to walk in a manner "worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27).

f. Be Humble

After evaluating his behavior and seeing the chaos he caused in the church, the man needed to humble himself and repent of his angry outburst. He had chosen the wrong time and place to speak out. He had slandered and questioned the motives of a fellow servant of the Lord, which he had no right to do. He needed to recognize his sin and repent, and he needed to apologize to the people who had heard his angry accusations.

When sinful infighting broke out, the leaders of the church should have called for prayer, fasting, and repentance in order to restore an attitude of humility and love. They should not have tried to deal with the problem until self-serving, sinful attitudes were first amended. With an attitude of Spirit-controlled humility, the disagreement over altar calls could have been handled civilly and constructively. Instead, believers chose to bite and devour one another and make a first-class display of "the works of the flesh."

How will we respond to conflict as individual believers and within our church families? Will we display the beautiful fruit of the Holy Spirit, or will we display the ugliness of the flesh? Every conflict reveals whether we practice what we preach, whether we are doers of the Word or hearers only (James 1:22). Every conflict reveals the genuineness of our Christian life (1 Cor. 11:19). Jesus said, "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" (John 13:17) and we each are accountable to him.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Galatians 5:25-26

¹For a biography, see Colin Duriez, *Francis Schaeffer: An Authentic Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

²“Mission to Intellectuals,” *Time* (January 11, 1960).

³ Duriez, *Francis Schaeffer: An Authentic Life*, 87. Francis Schaeffer, *The Church Before the Watching World*, in *The Complete Works*, Vol. 4, Book 2 (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1983), 151-63.

⁴“We must look moment by moment to the work of Christ, to the work of the Holy Spirit. Spirituality begins to have real meaning in our moment-by-moment lives as we begin to exhibit simultaneously the holiness of God and the love of God” (Schaeffer, *The Church Before the Watching World*, 152).

⁵James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 232.

⁶For an exposition of each of these fifteen qualities, see Alexander Strauch, *A Christian Leader’s Guide to Leading With Love* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 2006), 39-88.

⁷Rom. 5:5; 15:30; Gal. 5:22; Col. 1:8.

⁸Thomas R. Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 143.

⁹Lev. 19:17-18; Prov. 20:22; 24:17-18, 29.

¹⁰Patience: Ex. 34:6; Jer. 15:15; Rom. 2:4; 9:22; Gal. 5:22; 1 Tim. 1:16; 2 Peter 3:9, 15. Kindness: Ruth 2:20; 2 Sam. 9:3; Ps. 106:7; 145:17; Luke 6:35; Rom. 2:4; 11:22; Eph. 2:7; Titus 3:4; 1 Peter 2:3. Paul’s example and instructions: 2 Cor. 6:3-4, 6; 2 Tim. 2:24; 4:2.

¹¹Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60.

¹²Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 510.

¹³Alfred Tennyson, *Queen Mary* (Boston, MA: James R. Osgood, 1875), 194.

¹⁴Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 3rd ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 83.

¹⁵Matt. 5:22-24; 18:15-17; 2 Cor. 2:2-4; 7:8-13; Gal. 2:11-14; 2 Thess. 3:6-15.

¹⁶In Romans 14:1, Paul refers to these controversial issues as “opinions,” or “disputed matters” (NIV). By this he means they are not fundamental doctrines but secondary matters of personal conscience. See chapter 6 for more detail on this subject.

¹⁷John 13:14; Rom. 15:1-3, 8; 1 Cor. 8:1, 13; 9:19-23; 10:24, 32-33; Gal. 5:13; 6:2.

¹⁸Peter H. Davids, James, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 41.

¹⁹Jerome, *Commentarius ad Galatas* (6:10). *Patrologia Latina* (*Patrologiae cursus completus, series latina*), vol. 26, edited by J.-P. Migne (Paris 1866), column 462C. English translation by Michael Woodward.

Making a Multi-Speaker Sermon Series Work by Peter Mead

Some churches never try such a thing. Some assemblies have no alternative. How do you combine a group of preachers, one Bible book and a set of Sundays into an effective sermon series?

A well-planned and well-executed series of sermons has great leverage in the life of the fellowship. However, there is often a real inconsistency in the preaching of a series. This inconsistency undermines the effectiveness of the series in the life of the assembly. A single series should present the message of a book clearly, reinforce that message and sear it into the hearts of the gathered assembly. Sadly, an inconsistent series can amount to little more than background noise in the life of the fellowship.

What are the typical weaknesses found in multi-speaker series? Inconsistent explanation of the book’s historical context, flow of thought or overarching idea. Confusingly differing perspectives on the book’s purpose or theological center. Unnecessary repetition

of illustrative or supporting materials. A lack of repetition of key series elements making it seem like random messages that happen to be from one book. The list could go on!

So how can we make a multi-speaker sermon series work? Here are 12 practical suggestions:

1. Clarify the series' goals. For a single message to be effective, it is important to define the specific goals for the message. Haddon Robinson refers to sermon purpose as the preacher's target—a bulls-eye at which to aim the big idea of the message. This purpose should be specific, concrete, defined. The same is true for a series of sermons. What do the elders hope to achieve by the preaching of this series to this assembly at this time? The goals may influence the choice of book (if it is a series of studies in a Bible book), or the book may influence the goals. Once the goals are established and written down, the elders can then make key decisions including who will speak in the series:

2. Form a team of preachers for the series. Rather than having individual speakers enter the process as speakers for individual passages, form a team of preachers for the whole series. It is so easy to preach as separate individuals, with no interaction between the speakers in a series. Yet this is a great opportunity for team camaraderie to develop. The speakers each know what the others are putting into the series. They understand the goals, the emotions, the struggles. Encourage e-mail and phone conversations between the speakers. Pray for one another. Really seek to stand together in the mission of preaching this book to the fellowship. The team may consist of all elders, some elders, or even no elders (unlikely, but if so, have one elder on the team anyway to maintain oversight). While an elder maintains oversight of the project, allow the team to take ownership of the series:

3. Give the team ownership of the series. It is tempting to over-prescribe a series. That is, inviting people onto a team, but with passages, titles, suggested big ideas, etc. already mapped out for them. This will feel like a "pseudo-team." Allow participants to take ownership of the whole. If various individuals are entrusted with preaching single messages, it is not unrealistic to allow them influence over the whole series (recognizing that the elders must maintain appropriate oversight over the series, as they should over individual messages). Perhaps the team should work together on how the book should be divided, the titles of messages and so on.

4. Consider limiting the number of speakers. Instead of rotating through six speakers in a 12-part series, cut it down to three or four (even fewer in a shorter series). This makes for greater continuity and ownership of the series. If your church has six capable speakers, perhaps use the others to form the backbone of the next series (and give them good time to prepare for it). If your church does not have six capable speakers, then why are six preaching? Obviously each assembly is different, but the problem is often the desire to spread a series over too many speakers, rather than not having enough. One further thought, if the series is broken for a special Sunday such as Mother's Day, be careful not to automatically put a "now and then" preacher in for that day. It is tempting to do so since they can prepare for months and not worry about being in a series, but such

days also tend to bring guests in to the assembly (why not give guests a taste of the quality of preaching that they will hear on a “normal” Sunday?) Perhaps pull a preacher in from the team that is planning the next series for this kind of Sunday.

5. Plan ahead and allow plenty of lead time. If a team is formed at the last minute, then each speaker will only be able to focus on their next message. It is important to give as much as several months of lead time if possible. Good lead time allows the speakers to ponder the Bible book and the series as a whole. It allows the speakers to plot a combined strategy for the series, so that the best material isn't all poured into the first messages, leaving the rest of the series to just survive. This lead time allows the speakers to form effective message and series titles. Rather than a bland title that sends the congregation to sleep in anticipation, titles should intrigue, stir curiosity, create tension. The title of a message should not be the main idea of the message.

6. Every message does not have to cover the same amount of text. It is tempting to simply slice up a book in equal chunks. Typically a four chapter book is preached in four weeks, a six chapter book in six. However, there are times when one week might cover a larger chunk of the book, while another week might focus in on a few verses. It is important to recognize that some speakers are better at handling a passage requiring a big picture view, summarizing and handling the flow of several units of thought. Equally, other speakers do better with explanation of fine detail.

7. Every message should stand alone, and stand for the series. It is best to assume the listeners will only hear one message, rather than the whole series. Thus each speaker should make each message stand alone and give clear statement of the overarching idea for the series. This way the message of the whole series is reinforced in each message for those who hear multiple messages. This does not mean that every sermon has to repeat the same amount of historical background detail. This can become tedious and is not always necessary for a message. It is also important for the speakers to communicate with each other enough so they know what's coming. Knowing what is coming next week allows the speaker this week to integrate preview comments or teasers to motivate return visits. If those teaser-comments are well planned, they may motivate attendees to bring guests with them. For example, *“You may be wondering how this principle might work in the home. Next week we will see how effective it is in marriage, then the week after, in parenting. Perhaps you know someone who might benefit from those messages.”*

8. Work to each speaker's strengths. We know that different speakers have different strengths, yet we don't always assign passages accordingly. In some assemblies subject matter may determine which speaker takes the subject, sometimes predictably so. However, there is more to a message than its subject. Some passages require a detailed analysis and explanation; others require a broader survey of material. Some preachers do better with big-picture messages, others with fine detail. Then there are those passages that touch on sensitive issues, and others that beg for creativity in presentation (such as a dramatic monologue/first-person presentation).

9. Consider a non-preaching team member. Perhaps a research assistant could feed quality information and potential support material to the speakers on the team. This would help strengthen speakers who are weaker in these areas, while providing a mentoring opportunity for a potential future speaker. It is too easy in the busy routine of maintaining the program to fail to invest for the future. Is there really any good reason why mentoring is not happening in every area of assembly leadership and ministry?

10. Have a pre-series meeting of the speakers. Have the speakers read through the book and do some initial thinking on the book's major chunks, overarching idea and purpose, preaching sections, and a rough statement of the main idea for each preaching section. This meeting could take some time, but if we place a high value on the pulpit ministry of the assembly, then why not? Also, share any particularly helpful resources. For instance, I recently started a series in 1 Peter at our fellowship and found one commentary to be very strong on the historical background of the book. It would be better for all the speakers to know that resource rather than presenting several differing perspectives.

10b. In a longer series, have a mid-series evaluation. It is wise to avoid a series that goes so long it starts to drag. So by longer series, I mean 8-12 Sundays rather than 4-6. A time of evaluation would provide an opportunity to get together and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the series so far. It would give an opportunity to highlight areas that could be strengthened by the group as the series continues. Perhaps it would be time for a re-evaluation of the later sections in light of further study, or just a good chance to pray for each other and the messages that lie ahead.

11. As a team, select one individual to wrap-up the series so that it has a strong finish. In light of the team interaction, there may be one preacher especially suited to wrapping up the series, perhaps the one with the best grasp of the whole book. Instead of fading to the finish, finish strong with a message reviewing the book in its entirety—a big-picture finish with a big punch.

12. Get feedback and have a post-series evaluation. Share lessons learned and make suggestions for future series. Also, at the end of the series, or at the end of the year, put closure on the teamwork with some kind of thanksgiving and celebration. Incidentally, perhaps each member of the team could recruit a prayer partner for the team, thereby adding the support of faithful prayer warriors in the assembly. Why not include these people in a post-series thanksgiving too?

A series of messages preached by more than one preacher can be very powerful. Equally, a series can be deeply disappointing. These suggestions are made in the hope that such series can be leveraged to the maximum. The Word of God is a central source of blessing in the life of any fellowship. Why not take steps to be the best stewards of sermon series that we can be?

The Potency of the Word of God
By Chris Lange

When I was saved in 1970 and came under the expository teaching of the Word of God at Littleton Bible Chapel, it was a revelation. Not only did I hear the truth of God's Word carefully and fully explained, but I also recognized how powerful it was in changing my life. Paul's commendation of the believers in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 has always reminded me of my beginning faith as a believer: "For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe" (*NASB*). Hence, what remains always critical for Bible teachers is the mandate that the body of Christ must be built up and strengthened in God's Word, that the power of the Word be given free rein in our lives.

Several years ago, R. Kent Hughes made this comment concerning the importance of expository preaching: "[It] will only flourish when the preacher believes that Scripture is wholly inerrant, totally sufficient and massively potent."¹ How true this is! Preachers of the Word need to be confident that their painstaking exposition will have its resultant effect on the listener. Its *potency* is the uncompromising influence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. I reveled in this as a baby Christian, and I continue to wonder at the irresistible power of the Spirit of God in me as a mature believer. It is the exhortation from text that the apostle Paul continually emphasized in his encouragement to believers: "[Hold] fast the word of life" (Phil. 2: 16); "let the word of God dwell richly within you" (Col. 3: 16); "[hold] fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that [an elder] may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (Ti. 1: 9). Our pulpits must ring with these directives!

Because I have worked with youth for my entire professional teaching career, I feel it is critical as well that our youth in the pews hear the unvarnished truth of Scripture *and* its relevant application. In an age when relativism and intellectual doubt besiege youth—whether from the Internet or from college classes or from television—churches cannot afford to make any assumptions about what youth are learning and retaining from God's Word. Preachers must make truths from Scripture appropriate for the whole congregation, including both references to and careful consideration of those issues that face youth today. If we "mean what we say," then we must "say what we mean" in clear terms that youth can grasp and hold fast in their hearts. However complicated and disillusioning the issues may be that face our youth today, no issue is removed from the scope and power of scriptural teaching. Young people often may feel that the issues they face are too complicated or too distant from the understanding of their parents and other adults. This is not so. Our children must hear clearly from the pulpit that God's Word is sufficient for them—and powerful enough—to deal with the world they face. They must internalize what *all believers* must accept: "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit,

¹ R. Kent Hughes, August 30-31, 2007, Northcutt Lecture Series at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4: 12).

It is a sad reality that many Bible-preaching churches today experience decreasing numbers of churchgoers who gravitate toward seeker-friendly, mega-programmed church services that promise to give them a “more friendly gospel” and a comfortable social network. Included in those families are the children who ought to be preparing to become the leaders of the body of Christ in the coming years. The quality and caliber of expository preaching must remain the central focus of our churches if we expect to maintain godly, scriptural influence in the body of Christ—and if we intend to hand the baton to our youth and see them run with it.

Dr. MacLeod Asks

Faculty member Dave MacLeod leads us in a public forum to discuss issues pertinent to contemporary Christian life. Last issue he asked the following question:

While waiting for the Sunday service to begin, retired Emmaus faculty member, Dr. David Reid, was reading over a local assembly’s weekly bulletin when he glanced at their doctrinal statement. It was well written, orthodox and centered on the great truths of the faith. “Dr. Dave” was startled, however, when he read the paragraph on the Trinity. It said, “God is one in essence and has three personalities.” After the service he pointed this out to one of the elders and said, “This sentence is modalistic.” The elder thanked Dave, brought the offending sentence to the other elders’ attention, and the bulletins had been corrected by the following week’s service. My question is in three parts: (1) What was wrong with the doctrinal statement? (2) What is modalism? (3) What does your church’s doctrinal statement say about the Trinity?

J. J. Routley Responds

The essential error with the assembly’s doctrinal statement was a confusion regarding the nature of God. It’s a confusion that has been a problem from time to time in the history of the church. The doctrinal statement of the local chapel stated: “God is one in essence and has three personalities.” That sentence has two parts. First, God is one in essence. This is the clear teaching of Scripture, supported by both Old and New Testaments (see Deut. 6:4, Eph. 4:6, and James 2:19 for a few examples). Another way of stating this is to say there is one divine nature. The word of God is clear that there is *only one* divine nature. We do not worship three separate “gods.”

The second phrase of that doctrinal statement said that God “has three personalities.” This was where the statement erred. It is not right to say God has three *personalities*. Instead the Bible teaches that the one God eternally exists in three distinct *persons*. If we say God has three *personalities*, the implication is that He is one person who sometimes acts as “Father,” sometimes as “Son” and other times as “Spirit,” much like an actor would assume different roles in his career. This is the heretical teaching called modalism.

Historically, modalism was an attempt by some in the days of the early church to reconcile the strict monotheism of the Old Testament with Jesus' claims to deity in the New Testament. Sabellius, one proponent of this view, thought that God manifested Himself as Father in the OT, later as Jesus to redeem humanity from sin, and then as the Holy Spirit to aid in the life of the church. The early church rejected this teaching as unbiblical. Modalism is dangerous because it ultimately eliminates the real distinctions between persons in the Trinity, and claims that the Father is the same *person* as the Son (but a different manifestation or personality), the Son is the same *person* as the Spirit, etc.

The baptism of Jesus is one example of an instance where each person of the Trinity was present at the same time (Mt. 3:13-17, Mk. 1:9-13, Lk. 3:21-22). Look also at John 12:27-29, where the Son spoke to the Father, and the Father responded to Him. If God manifests Himself sometimes as Father and sometimes as Son, passages like John 12:27-29 reveal some kind of divine schizophrenia, where God is really only holding a conversation with Himself.

The doctrinal statement of my local chapel reads as follows: "We believe in one God. He is the Creator of everything, and has always existed in three equal Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—called the Trinity." I believe this is an accurate doctrinal statement about the Trinity, and emphasizes two points regarding the nature of God. First, God is one in nature, or essence. We serve one God, not three. Second, God eternally exists as three distinct persons who each partake or share in the one divine nature. The divine nature is not divided between the three, but they each in themselves are fully God in the same way that the three together are fully God.

Although the incorrect doctrinal statement (of the assembly Dr. Dave visited) appears to be an innocent mistake, it provides us with a good reminder. We must be knowledgeable in our understanding and careful in our communication of the nature of God.

J.J. Routley
Dubuque, IA

Dr. MacLeod Asks

Next Issue's Question

A Brethren assembly writer from Glasgow, Scotland pointedly addressed preachers in the United Kingdom, "We hear much devotional ministry and challenging exhortation from the platform, but neither of these will be of any lasting value unless they are seen to be rooted in the text of Scripture. Too often the passage read has little bearing on the message which follows, and it takes little intelligence on the part of the congregation to notice that the speaker lacks divine authority for his pronouncements. A superstructure is only as secure as its foundation, and preaching, however impressive, eloquent, or emotional, is so much rhetorical hot air if divorced from the Word. It is fast becoming a rarity these days to hear exhortation clearly built upon correct exegesis. It is even more of a rarity to hear expository ministry! The reason is not hard to seek. Exposition requires

effort. And it is precisely such effort which I would urge upon my readers” (David J. Newell, “The Believer’s Library (3): Some Basic Bible Study Aids (ii),” *Believer’s Magazine* (March, 1999): 73–74).

My question is threefold: (1) What do you think of Mr. Newell’s philosophy of preaching? (2) Does the condition Brother Newell describes have any bearing on conditions in North America? (3) In light of his remarks, how would you describe the preaching in your assembly (anonymous replies will be accepted)?

Please send responses to Journey Magazine, Emmaus Bible College, 2570 Asbury Road, Dubuque, IA 52001, or e-mail to journey@emmaus.edu. Include name, city, state, and daytime phone number. Letters may be edited to yield brevity and clarity.