

Relevant Biblical Preaching without Dumbing Down

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Like pizza, sermons come in two distinct forms: deep dish or thin and crispy. Either the content is so “deep” that we cannot possibly discern what we’re eating or the toppings are so sparse than, an hour later, we wonder why we bothered ordering. Deep dish sermons are filling, even stuffy, and require lots of chewing. Thin and crispy sermons go down effortlessly, but leave us craving more substance. Deep dish sermons are full of stuff – content rules! Thin and crispy sermons appear so appetizing, but they offer very little substance for satisfaction.

Is it possible to serve savory and satisfying sermons? Relevant biblical preaching not only tastes great, it satisfies the nutritional longings of the soul. Like a good recipe, however, relevant biblical sermons must mix the right ingredients both proportionately and sequentially. How do we preach biblical content with relevance, without becoming too thin? Three strategies root the sermon in the biblical text while demonstrating the relevance of the Scripture to daily living.

First, look from the pew rather than the pulpit.

In relevant biblical preaching, perspective is everything. When it comes to relevance, we have to ask ourselves, “Who determines whether the sermon is relevant?” From a theological perspective, the only viable answer to the question is: God. God did not leave us his Word in hopes that we would discover some human utilitarian value in it. He revealed himself and his will to bring himself glory through the obedience and praise of his people. From a communications perspective, however, listeners determine whether the sermon is relevant. We might think that this communicative perspective seems contrary to the theological perspective, but the two are quite compatible.

For a long time, I struggled with trying to “be relevant.” That was the case because I focused on the wrong part of the sermonic process. I asked, “How can the preacher be relevant?”, a focus on the sender. I asked, “How can the sermon be relevant?”, a focus on the channel. I asked, “How can the Bible be relevant?”, a focus on the message. Relevance, however, is a relative word. So, we have to ask, “Relevant to whom?”, a focus on the receiver.

With only a cursory look, I rejected this receiver orientation because it seemed too pragmatic, too humanistic for my theocentric preaching paradigm. I hesitated because I feared that receiver orientation would lead to what I think masquerades for relevant biblical preaching. We hear sermons that are no more than pop-psychology (“Ten Timely Tips for Taming Your Teenager”) or Sunday’s weekly survival prescription (“How to Hold Up in a Fold-Up World”). These may be appealing titles, but you could summarize the substance of the truth found in those sermons on a 1×3 mailing label and still have white space left over. I feared that this receiver orientation would dissolve biblical and theological content, that the communicative perspective would overwhelm the theological perspective. In other words, I feared that the sermon would become simply a “sales job.”

We can, however, and we must take a communicative perspective without rejecting the theological perspective that preaching ultimately seeks to bring glory to God through the glad submission of human hearts. Our communicative perspective then serves as a means to the theological perspective. We are not making God's Word relevant. We are demonstrating that God's Word is relevant, both to God and to His people.

If then we are to demonstrate the relevance of God's Word to listeners, we must take the perspective of the pew rather than the pulpit. As a student of Scripture, trained in exegesis and theology, I can get lost in the study of the Ancient Near East's worship of Baal, the composition of the tribes of Israel, or the debates about the scientific feasibility of Elijah's fire from heaven. As a preacher, give me good biblical historical-theological evidence, and I'll buy the sermon's thesis. But I'm thinking as a preacher because I live in a preacher's world. The people to whom I speak on Saturday night and Sunday morning live in a world of bioethics, mediated violence, car payments and the Internet. Trying to explain to them Elijah's conflict on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18) by giving an abbreviated history lesson on Baal worship is like trying to sell flood insurance in the desert. That's because I'm talking in the preacher's world.

When I talk in the listener's world, I may need to explain the essential tenets of Baal worship so that people will understand what Elijah was up against. The Ancient Near East offered an assortment of deities. People could choose one god over another, or to be safe, they might worship several gods. Elijah made it perfectly clear that the people could not waver between gods. The God of Israel is the only true God. Sitting in the pew are Jay and Leah. Their son Jason is a freshman at a major university. One of his classes is a study of world religions. Jay and Leah fear the beliefs being pumped into Jason's mind: that religion is a sociological phenomenon of every culture, a matter of choice, an option in pluralism. To suggest that there is only one correct belief system is irrational and exclusive. These are the culture wars of our day. They sound a lot like the culture wars of Elijah's day. When we see the similarity between the two situations, we need to ask, why was Elijah so insistent that the people of Israel not waver between gods? And when we discover the answer in the theology of the Old Testament, we are ready to talk to Jay and Leah about how to help Jason face the challenges of his own culture wars. When I look from the pulpit, I see Baal worship, Elijah, sinful Israel and a fascinating showdown on Mount Carmel. When I look from the pew, I see Jason, 230 miles away, shy, questioning, tempted, facing the challenges to his monotheistic Christian faith. In preaching, perspective is everything.

Second, what the listener's appetite for God's Word.

I would love to think that Jay and Leah came to church this morning craving the truth of God's Word about monotheism. Maybe they did, but they may not know it yet. If I begin the sermon in the Ancient Near East or by talking about the great victory of Elijah, they probably will overlook the relevance of God's Word. Unfortunately, I cannot assume their appetite just because I say, "Let's turn in our Bibles to 1 Kings 18." I have to help them want to hear from God. Rather than assume that people will discern the relevance of the biblical passage, the sermon needs to begin where people are and then cultivate an appetite for God's Word. So, the sermon will start by talking about how we know that we really have the

truth. We'll explore questions such as: "Is there only one God?" "Are we being too narrow-minded when we contend that the God of the Bible is the only true God?" "Why can we be confident that Christianity is right?" More than merely probing these questions cognitively, the sermon needs to touch the heart and show the significance of these questions in concrete experience.

For example, I may try to show the significance of teaching our children that there is one true God rather than a smorgasbord of religious options. I can move back to the fact that if we are going to teach our children the truth about God, we must be convinced that God is who he claims to be. At this point, Jay and Leah should be thinking about Jason and feeling the tension that begs for relief – relief that only God's Word can supply. Then when I move from talking about religious options and teaching children about God to the showdown on Mount Carmel, they are eager to hear about Elijah's contest. Once we look from the pew and whet people's appetite for God's Word, we are ready to show people what God's Truth looks like on the street.

Third, show 'n tell.

Stating biblical truth without showing what it looks like in real life is like forgetting to bring your hamster to show 'n' tell on pet's day. You can describe the hamster: his twitching, long tail, fast feet on the treadmill, and soft, brown fur. But nothing takes the place of seeing (and smelling!) that critter. It is not enough to tell God's Word; we have to show it. If I call people to obedience, I try to give them a "success story" of someone who is obeying. Success stories take truth out of the realm of "pie in the sky" theology and say "It can be done."

It is not enough to say, "God wants you to prioritize your family over your career." Every professional man and woman knows how difficult that is. Careers require large quantities of time and creative energy. Too often, the kids get the leftovers, and there isn't much left in the dish. So, talented, capable people sit in the pew, saying "yes but..." to God. They need to see a success story or two.

If I tell them about my friend Mary who is an emergency room physician and a great mom, the feasibility of obedience begins to climb. Mary works 24 hours on and 48 hours off. she doesn't know how to live any other way than juggling. I don't know whether her house is always neat or the oil in her car is changed regularly, but I know her kids. They're winners. Along with Mary, I want people to hear about another friend, Steve. Steve jumps on and off airplanes most weeks. He spends a fortune on long distance calls. But Steve and his wife, Vicki, communicate more than most couples I know. And when Steve is home, his time belongs to Vicki and the kids. These stories visualize that God wants us to prioritize our families over our careers, and that it can be done.

When we look from the pew rather than the pulpit, whet people's appetite for God's Word, and show 'n' tell God's Truth, we can preach and teach God's Word with integrity and relevance. We do not need to settle for trite, cheap answers to people's troubling questions. We can turn them to the only reliable authority for life, the Bible, if only we will show them its relevance. As with good pizza, we will leave them satisfied and nourished, rather than stuffed or wanting. As we preach, let's help people savor God's Word.