

Preachers, Take That Hobbyhorse Out To Pasture

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Sam and Veronica, a young couple, are expecting their first child in the next few months. They are scared, because in the last 2 years they have had two miscarriages.

Jennifer, now in her late 40's, recently lost her husband to another woman and is now suffering through an ugly divorce process. To make matters worse, the elders have largely been uninvolved in the situation, leaving her all alone to deal with the consequences of her husband's sin.

Charles and Donna just found out that their 5-year-old grandson has been diagnosed with cancer. They wish to help more with the situation, but his family lives 12 hours away.

Jacob, a senior in high school, thinks he might be gay, but is afraid to talk to anyone at church about the temptation because he knows he might be labeled and written off.

James and Melissa have their hands full raising four children, all under the age of 10. Sharon is the sole caretaker of her father who has dementia. No one is offering to help her.

Andrea is a beautiful 35-year-old divorced mom who was abused. Her situation is such that she has no Scriptural right to re-marry and has to raise her children alone by herself.

Megan, a sophomore in college, is in a serious relationship with one of her classmates. She thinks he may soon ask her to marry him. She is uneasy about this, however, because he seldom comes to church (even though his parents regularly attend a sister congregation).

Frank, now in his late 70's, is still grieving the loss of his wife who died 6 months ago. Next week would have been their 50th wedding anniversary.

All Of These People Are At Your Church

On Sunday morning, all of these people will come to the church building to worship their Creator. Yes, they may have different names and the details of their unique life situations may be different, but rest assured they are there. Adding to this complexity is the fact that they are all at different stages of spiritual maturity. Some grew up in the church; others were converted at various stages of life.

And now you, the preacher, have been charged with the weighty responsibility of regularly preaching to these people. What topic are you going to preach about for the 10th time this year? Denominationalism? Morality? Grace? Sin?

I try to remind myself of the magnitude of problems and issues the audience is facing whenever I prepare a sermon. This is a sobering exercise, especially for a young preacher like myself. I can't help but ask myself, *"What can I possibly say that will help Sam & Veronica, Jennifer, Sharon, Andrea, Frank, and everyone else?"*

And then I remember that there is nothing *I* can possibly say that is worth their time. My life is different than theirs. My advice, wisdom, and experience is woefully inadequate to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of the audience. They don't need to listen to me. **What Sam & Veronica, Jennifer, Sharon, Andrea, Frank, and the rest of the audience needs - more than anything else - is a message straight from God's Word.** God intended for His people to be encouraged on to greater faithfulness through "the foolishness of preaching" (1 Cor. 1:21). And the preacher must make that happen (Rom. 10:14).

Therefore, preachers should fight the urge to bring hobbyhorses into the pulpit. **Far too often, preachers present topical sermons about the issues they care about on the topics they think are important at the neglect of the rest of God's Word.**

Are Your Sermons Mostly *Topical* Or *Expository*?

Are you doing the congregation a favor when most of your sermons are topical in nature, comprised almost entirely of anecdotes and textual references that have been pieced together from every corner of the Bible? Is the church benefiting in the long-run when a vast majority of your lessons are three-point, cleverly alliterated sermons that touch on only a handful of basic topics (i.e. “grace,” “denominationalism,” “worship,”) throughout the year?

I know what I am saying should be understood with balance. But as Denny Petrillo once said, “*Preachers should have to earn the right to preach topically.*” I understand what he means. Instead of relying entirely on my own [naïve] judgment, I try to semi-systematically preach through the Bible with expository sermons. Mark Dever defines expository preaching as preaching that “*exposes God’s Word to God’s people, that opens it up to them and applies it to their hearts so that they may understand it and obey it*” (36).

Expository preaching says, “*God knows better than I do about what this congregation needs to hear, so I am going to let Him say it.*” If preachers dedicate themselves to primarily preaching the *Text*, rather than preaching only topical sermons, they will avoid the mistake of *hobbyhorse* preaching.

Of course there is a time and place for topical sermons. The church needs to hear lessons about denominationalism, baptism, repentance, marriage & divorce, worship, and morality (and shame on you if you do not regularly address these topics). But at some point the pulpit must go *beyond* these topics (cf. Heb. 6:1).

The congregation has far too many needs for you to meet from the pulpit alone. Take the burden off your shoulders by allowing God to speak *through* you. Expose the Word. Be the messenger, not the author. In due time, the needs of the congregation will be addressed in balance.

What every person in the audience on Sunday morning needs more than anything else is the Word of God. It gives direction (Psa. 119:105), offers comfort (107), equips you to overcome temptation (11), and gives zeal (139). I cannot improve on that.

Works Cited

Dever, Mark. *Preach: Theology Meets Practice*. B&H Publishing Group: Nashville, TN. 2012.

Petrillo, Denny. “Unashamed Workmen: Principles of Biblical Exegesis.” Focal Point 2014 Lectures. University church of Christ: San Marcos, TX.

